

Houston Asian American Archive Chao Center for Asian Studies, Rice University

Interviewee: Glen Yoshiaki Gondo
Interviewer: Renuka Rege
Date/Time of interview: July 12, 2011
Transcribed by: Jarvis Sam
Edited by: Priscilla Li
Audio Track Time: 1:02:48

Background:

Glen Yoshiaki Gondo was born in Los Angeles, California in 1948. His parents were interned in the Japanese Internment Camp in Colorado for 2.5 years. They were only allowed two suitcases before they were ordered to get on the train to Colorado, and lost everything they left behind. They were released in Stockton, CA later after 2.5 years.

Soon after, he and his family moved to Watsonville, California to open labor camps as part of the *Bracero* Program. After spending most of his childhood in Watsonville, Glen and his family moved to Dallas, Texas to open a Japanese restaurant in 1962. To finish high school and graduate, he moved back to Watsonville and then went to Denton, Texas to study Economics at North Texas State University in 1967. After a year, however, Glen moved back to Los Angeles to be with his girlfriend and attended junior colleges there. In 1972, he moved to Miami, Florida because his family opened another restaurant there. After working for a year, Glen and his wife Kathleen got married in 1973 before moving back to California where he worked in the frozen food business.

After two years, he moved to New York City to join his family in the jewelry business until 1984 when he moved to Houston, Texas to be General Manager of one of his family's restaurants, Tokyo Gardens. Glen's son Robert was born in 1985, and in 1987 Glen started a sushi catering business, live sushi bars, and sushi bars in Fiesta supermarkets. He also began consulting for Japanese companies like Toshiba, started an international trade business, and opened retail stores at Bush Intercontinental Airport. In 1998, Glen sold Tokyo Gardens and began catering for Continental Airlines and at universities, culminating in the opening of sushi bars in HEB supermarkets in 2002. He is active in the Asian American political sphere, nonprofit organizations, and many other areas of the Houston community.

Setting:

The interview focuses on the themes of labor and capital to develop a history of Glen Yoshiaki Gondo's professional life in the context of his childhood, family life, and cultural background. Much attention is given to his numerous ventures in the Japanese food business, including a Japanese restaurant, a sushi catering business, live sushi bars, and sushi bars in supermarkets. The interview was conducted in Rayzor Hall at Rice University, and it required approximately one hour. Glen's pleasant and relaxed demeanor is reflected throughout the interview as he fondly recounts stories about his idyllic childhood in Watsonville, California. He gives a detailed description of his movement around the country to help manage his family's various Japanese restaurants as well as to work in the jewelry business. Glen reflects on his development as a businessman and provides helpful tips to aspiring young Asian professionals. He is a priceless historical addition to the archive.

Key:

GG Glen Gondo
RR Renuka Rege
- Speech cuts off; abrupt stop
... Speech trails off; pause
Italics Emphasis
(?) Preceding word may not be accurate
Brackets Actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)

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Interview Transcript:

RR: Okay. So this is Renuka Rege and I'm here from Rice University with the Houston Asian American Archive Project um in Razor Hall at Rice and we're here with Mr. Glen Yoshiaki Gondo.

GG: Yes.

RR: Okay so um I guess we can start with a little bit of your background. Um. You're of Japanese origin so where and you were born in the U.S. so were your parents also born in the U.S.?

GG: Yes, they were. My mother was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. My father's born in Seattle, Washington.

RR: So how did your family come to live in the U.S.?

GG: My grandfather came from Japan in the early 1900s, 1898 I believe it was for economic reasons for jobs and then um my father's like I mentioned was born in Seattle, Washington and my mother's born in Honolulu, Hawaii. And I was born in Los Angeles.

RR: Okay.

GG: I'm a third generation Japanese American.

RR: Yeah, yeah. So your family's been here for a long time.

GG: Mhm.

RR: Um so...During um World War II, what did your parents experience?

GG: Well they were interned as Americans of Japanese descent in a camp in Colorado for about and a half years.

RR: Okay.

GG: And it was a very tragedy for them [**RR:** Yeah.] because they were only allowed to carry two suitcases.

RR: Yeah.

GG: And get on a train to Colorado. And so they were leasing a farm in Stockton, California. And the bank took over it and so they lost everything and they were broke.

RR: And this was before you were born?

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GG: Fortunately, yes I was born in 1948.

RR: Were you the oldest child?

GG: I'm the youngest.

RR: Oh, you're the youngest. So your siblings were also—they also experienced that?

GG: No, they were born right after.

RR: Okay.

GG: I was born in '48. I have two older brothers one is born in '46, one in '47.

RR: Okay, okay so um once your parents were able to leave the camp, they went to California?

GG: yes, they went to Los Angeles [**RR:** Okay.] and started a started a Chinese restaurant. And um didn't make it [**RR:** Yeah.] and so they moved up to a small agriculture area in Monterrey Bay area city called Watsonville and they were in the Bracero program if you know what that is.

RR: No.

GG: That was...they had a contract with the Mexican government to bring Mexican nationals to pick the strawberries and vegetables in Salinas valley. And so they had they started with maybe twenty of them and it was Gondelay Labor Camp 1. And then my mother was a very good businesswoman and she opened Gondelay Boot Camp 2, we had 1500 Nationals and we housed them and fed them and took them. We had fifteen trucks and took them out to the fields to pick the berries and lettuce and cherries and I would go out there and bring them hot lunches and feed them. And then we come back. And they would we would feed them dinner at the mess halls like regular army camp.

RR: Oh wow.

GG: Back in the '50s.

RR: Huh.

GG: You know?

RR: Okay so um, that's primarily what your parents were involved in while you were growing up.

GG: In California yes.

RR: In California, okay. So um I mean tell me a little bit about your childhood.

GG: Well, growing up in Watsonville California was a lot of fun because it was like living out in the country. I think the population in Watsonville was only about 12,000 in those days. And we were only five miles away from the beach and only a mile away from the mountains. So it was in a valley called Pajaro Valley and so it's as I mention it was an agriculture area and so it was very beautiful.

RR: Yeah it must have been.

GG: And so I had a horse to be able to go riding horses and camping out, hunting and stuff like that. So

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it was a really great childhood.

RR: Yeah, well-

GG: Just a little insight—you know I'm married.

RR: Mhm.

GG: I met my wife in the 5th grade when we were 10 years old.

RR: Really? That's when you first met her?

GG: Yes, yes she was real cute.

RR: Oh, that's amazing! Did you guys keep in touch throughout your life?

GG: yes, mainly after high school.

RR: Okay.

GG: And in fact we will be married 37 years.

RR: Yeah wow!

GG: Since I'm 62, I've known her over half a century.

RR: Oh my gosh. So childhood sweetheart?

GG: That's correct.

RR: Yeah. That's amazing. Um so you described—you mentioned you have two older brothers?

GG: Yes.

RR: And did you and your brothers experience any kind of discrimination growing up in Watsonville?

GG: Not really, not in Watsonville, California. There was a um pop—not a large population but maybe 3000, 2000 Japanese Americans living in Watsonville. [**RR:** Wow.] Most of them were in the farming industry um and so we had like two Japanese churches in Watsonville in a small town of 12,000, that's a lot. [**RR:** A lot.] So I never felt any kind of prejudice in those days.

RR: Okay.

GG: Growing up in grammar school or through high school.

RR: Okay so you were in a good location.

GG: Yes, yes—very liberal place.

RR: Yeah definite...still is!

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RR: So um, did your parents while they were raising you, did they incorporate Japanese culture or were they more? I mean I guess they were born in America so were they just completely Americanized by then?

GG: my mother and father spoke better Japanese than they did in English.

RR: Okay.

GG: But um speaking of their internment during the war. They never mentioned it to me.

RR: No.

GG: They wanted me to assimilate in America, speak English, have American friends and they never criticized the United States government for their internment and um after I grow older and learn what happened of course I had you know sad feelings for them that they went through that, but they never complained about it—about that.

RR: Nah. So do you speak Japanese?

GG: No, unfortunately – I...I know my numbers [**RR:** Okay!] but and I love Japanese food [**RR:** Yeah!] and I do know the culture quite a bit.

RR: Okay.

GG: and the protocol.

RR: Okay so you did have aspects of that.

GG: Yes.

RR: Okay.

GG: And my mother and father were Buddhist. I'm a Christian so.. .

RR: So you –you became Christian later on then.

GG: Yes, yes.

RR: Okay.

GG: I guess my peer pressure when you're little, from your friends and everybody.

RR: Yeah, I mean yeah. I remember when I was little everyone wondering. Because I'm not Christian...are you...what are you? You know.

GG: Right, right.

RR: Yeah um okay, so you mentioned your parents were in farming um...

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GG: Labor camp business.

RR: Labor camp business for the people who were involved in picking. Okay. So was that—what would you say was your economic status? Were you pretty comfortable as ...growing up?

GG: Yes—aw well, at the beginning, of course my mother and father struggled very-

RR: Cause started from scratch.

GG: Started from scratch and then built their way up sev—several years later

RR: Mhm.

GG: But, I guess when I was in High school I guess it would be middle class

RR: Okay, okay, so...

GG: ...and growing.

RR: Yeah! So they were good businessmen too?

GG: Oh, Yes they were, yes they were. They instilled a lot of discipline on me.

RR: Yeah, did you get some of your like business skills from your parents?

GG: Oh I would think so, absolutely, yeah.

RR: You probably just soaked it in without even realizing it.

GG: Right I guess so, but let me just say this—they worked much harder than I did.

RR: Oh okay. Yeah—I always feel that way about my parents too...um...okay I saw on your form this is um—as a child you –you said you worked for your parents

GG: Yes, I did all these odd jobs at the labor camp um. We had to make I think it was 15,000 tortillas a day.

RR: Wow!

GG: Yes and so I helped to count the tortillas. I think it was 7 tortillas in one batch and we pick it up and fold it and put it in a tray and that...and... For dinner time, stuff like that.

RR: Wow.

GG: I would have to... One of the things I enjoyed—we had fifteen trucks to deliver the braceros to the fields, but we had to fill the trucks up with gasoline and that was my responsibility-

RR: Oh okay.

GG: —but I had fun because I think I was only twelve or fourteen driving these trucks. To the gas...We had our own gasoline pump.

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RR: Oh okay.

GG: So I would fill them up and park the trucks. Stuff...little errands like that.

RR: Yeah so did your family cook the tortillas? And all the food-

GG: No, they hired Mexican chefs.

RR: Okay.

GG: Yes, yes fifteen hundred in braceros.

RR: Yeah, yeah that's a lot to cook.

GG: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

RR: That's a lot to cook. Yeah. And you mentioned how much your parents paid you—your parents pay you minimum wage?

GG: I think in those days was it a \$1.25? I think it was around...

RR: Wow, wow um was it—did you want to work or was it something that you just did as part of the family?

GG: I think a little of both, but I was probably kinda spoiled but like—we had a um community store called a canteen. And I would be able to sell the candy and soda pops and I got paid for that, but I think I ate most of the profits though.

RR: ...What did you do with your little money that you would make?

GG: Buy more candy and soda.

RR: Oh you would buy and sell so you'd invest it.

GG: Well...

RR: Kinda.

RR: But you didn't just eat the candy?

GG: I ate a lot of candy though.

RR: You were probably ate a bunch or two um...so how long—hm?

GG: But I of course doing school, sports and little league, baseball, basketball, cub scouts, [**RR:** All kinds of activities.] boy scouts, all the things that teenage boys get—do.

RR: Mhm...so you had a pretty active childhood.

GG: Yes-but even in the country there was no crime or no drugs or nothing that that I saw.

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RR: Well, that's a good place to grow up then.

GG: In the 50s though.

RR: Was.

GG: People were innocent in those days.

RR: Yeah —So how long did you continue to help out your parents?

GG: —my goodness there was a season for the crops so it was usually from I think April to November and then um the summertime was the busiest and so they had to close the camp in '61 I think cause Governor Brown passed a law not to bring in nationals to pick the crops anymore and so my mother and father had to sell the labor camp and they knew the president of Japan Food Corporation in San Francisco and he recommended to open up a Japanese restaurant in Dallas, Texas. And the reason is ...

RR: I'm sorry who recommended?

GG: The president of Japan Food Corporation in San Francisco.

RR: Oh okay.

GG: 'Cause they were opening a warehouse in Dallas to distribute the Japanese spice in the southwest.

RR: Oh.

GG: And they recommended my father and mother to open a Japanese restaurant to help supplement the warehouse and so that was back in '62 ...Unfortunately, President Kennedy got shot during that time [**RR:** Yes.] during that year, but we opened the restaurant and I used to work in that restaurant. I was a darn good dishwasher and bus boy.

RR: I bet...So you all moved to Dallas [**GG:** Yes.] in about '62?

GG: Ah yes in '62. Yes, yes. I um worked at the restaurant at minimum wage.

RR: Yeah yeah.

GG: I think I was 14 or 15 years old something like that when we moved to Dallas. [**RR:** Okay.] And worked in the restaurant business.

RR: Yeah...so—did you finish your high school there in Dallas?

GG: I went to my junior year there-

RR: Okay.

GG: —but then I begged my mother and father: please let me graduate from Watsonville High I went back 'cause I—as a teenager you miss your friends so much. [**RR:** Oh, for sure.] And so, they sent me out to California to live with my best friend out there. And they—I lived at their house and finished graduation there.

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RR: Oh okay...and what did you do after you graduated high school?

GG: I went to North Texas State University in Denton, Texas that's right above Dallas.

RR: So you moved to near your parents that area...

GG: Right it's about fifty miles north of Dallas.

RR: Oh okay.

GG: North Texas State. In those days—now's it's called University of North Texas I think it's called.

RR: Yeah they changed the wording around.

GG: Yeah.

RR: Yeah. So how—did you choose to go to that place because it was close to Dallas?

GG: yes.

RR: Okay.

GG: Yes, yes, absolutely.

RR: And how did you decide what to study?

GG: ...how did I decide? I guess economics—I studied economics so but I didn't graduate.

RR: Okay.

GG: Okay so I've been to many schools... And I love California so I went back out to California and went to junior colleges there. I went to UCLA summer school and USC summer school, and my wife went to Long Beach State so that's...my girlfriend then went to Long Beach State so that's why I wanted to go down to Los Angeles.

RR: Oh okay. So you did you did a couple of years at, at North Texas?

GG: One year.

RR: One year okay.... And you were like, 'I miss California too much.'

GG: Yeah and my girlfriend.

RR: And her, of course. So you guys were dating in high school.

GG: after high school.

RR: Right after.

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GG: Right after high school.

RR: So you wanted to go back to be with her and, and then you...how long did you spend there?

GG: About 4 years...I have relatives out in Los Angeles.

RR: Okay.

GG: And my mother and father were very generous to me—gave me an allowance and...

RR: So you took, took classes at various er—colleges?

GG: Yeah. I was a bad student.

RR: ... okay so well when did you guys get married?

GG: We got married in '73...1973—I graduated high school in '66 and so between those years... did we get married in '73 yeah '73, 37 years.

RR: Was that in Los Angeles or...?

GG: The marriage?

RR: Mhm.

GG: No, we got married in Watsonville.

RR: Okay.

GG: At, at my wife's church in Watsonville.

RR: Oh okay, okay. So how 'bout after the period in LA, what happened?

GG: let's see what did I do? I ...oh! I went to Miami. 'Cause we opened a restaurant there.

RR: In Miami!

GG: In Miami!

RR: Oh okay.

GG: And so, I helped my mother and father their one of their general managers...a lady—help her with opening of the restaurant and worked there for about a year I think in Miami and then I asked Cathy to come.

RR: Mhm.

GG: We weren't married yet.

RR: Oh okay.

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GG: But she came and she helped me at the restaurant too. And that was for one year and then she says . And then we had restaurant in Oklahoma City. My mom and dad wanted me to go to Oklahoma City to run a restaurant. I asked Cathy to come and she said, 'No unless we get married.'

GG: I said, 'Okay,'—so I think we only stayed 6 months in California then we decided to get married and then my best friend offered me a job out in California.

RR: Okay, wait let's back up. So your parents opened restaurants in...first one in Dallas and then in Miami, then Oklahoma City.

GG: Let me see.... Dallas, Houston, Miami, Oklahoma City, and Bryan, Texas.

RR: And during that time they still lived in Dallas.

GG: ...they lived in um Miami and Dallas and Houston—they had houses.

RR: Oh, they had, they had separate houses.

GG: Yeah right.

RR: And they would travel between them...

GG: Yes, but they liked Miami because of the weather and um my mom and dad loved horse racing.

RR:

GG: And so they had lot of horse race tracks over in Miami.

RR: So while they were—who would—who else would run the restaurant while they were...?

GG: Managers.

RR: Okay.

GG: Managers. And um my sister opened a Japanese restaurant in um San Antonio [**RR:** Okay.] the first one in San Antonio and one in Austin. She had three, three Japanese restaurants and two in Austin and one in San Antonio.

RR: So was this all in...

GG: Back in the '70s.

RR: Early 70s yeah...that's what I was about to ask you. Okay, okay so then you so you helped out managing these restaurants for a while...

GG: Until my wife wanted to get married.

RR: Right.

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GG: And my best friend offered me a job out there in the food business.

RR: In Los Angeles?

GG: No, in Watson—really Watsonville—he was one of the—had a factory of frozen vegetables.

RR: Okay.

GG: And I worked for him for a while and then um I was a frozen food broker in San Jose, California. I had an office there too and then my mom, my, my dad, and my older brother they started doing the jewelry business. ...Oak out of Mexico and Oak was out of Australia and shipped to Japan. And then my brother got a certificate for it's called GI—a JEM certificate of some kind. [**RR:** Okay.] And they started—they opened an Office in New York and started buying diamonds and then my father came out to San Francisco or San Jose and wanted me to get in the diamond business with my brother. So.

RR: When did—when did your parents, your dad and your brothers first get into the diamond business?

GG: Woo... [**RR:** Or the gem business?] '70...'73, '74, '75 maybe.

RR: Okay so you only worked for your friend and the frozen food business.

GG: About two years.

RR: For two years. Okay.

GG: For two years. Yeah. And then my mo—my dad wanted me to come into the diamond business up in New York.

RR: Did you decide to do that?

GG: I did that. And of course, Cathy and I were married by then.

RR: Yeah.

GG: She came up with me to New York. And we were in the diamond business for eight years.

RR: Oh wow.

GG: And we traveled to Israel to buy diamonds and New York to buy diamonds and shipped to Japan—we had clients in Japan because Japan the economy was really just growing and so I did that until the '80s... the '80s? Something like that.

RR: Mhm.

GG: My memory's not so good.

RR: ...that's ok.

GG: I was a member of the Diamond Club—I was the first Japanese American—my brother and I was the first in [**RR:** Yeah, yeah.] New York on 47th Street and 5th Avenue [**RR:** Oh wow.] and soit was an

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exciting time.

RR: Yeah I bet. You got to travel a lot.

GG: Yes we did. Yes we did. And then um my wife enjoyed —cause we didn't have a kid yet—

RR: Right.

GG: Being single and living in New York City is a lot of fun!

RR: Yeah!

GG: But then after that my mother wanted me to come to Houston to, to run the restaurant in Houston so I came back here to Houston I think it was 70 no 80... '84 I came back to Houston, but throughout the summer and everything I always come to Houston.

RR: Okay.

GG: I always worked or did something, come to here, spend a month or something like that.

RR: Okay so how come Houston was your home base, kind of?

GG: it was the biggest restaurant.

RR: Oh okay.

GG: ...our restaurant—we could seat three-hundred people.

RR: Wow!

GG: Yeah .

RR: Where did you say it was?

GG: It's on the...on Westheimer right inside the loop ...

RR: Mhm.

GG: Do you know where the Ho-uh—I forgot the...what's that restaurant right there on the corner of 610 and Westheimer, inside the Loop?

RR: I don't know.

GG: Anyway we had two acres there. Yeah they bought the land [**RR:** I see.] in the early days and so I would always come to Houston.

RR: Yeah—okay so then eventually finally...

GG: So I had a lot of Houston friends.

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RR: Yeah.

GG: Yeah, yeah.

RR: So eventually finally that's where you settled down.

GG: Right. And then ...my son was born in '85.

RR: Okay.

GG: In '85

RR: Okay.

GG: ...and I became General Manager of the restaurant.

RR: Yeah so that was in '85.

GG: '85.

RR: So what—tell me a little about that job what you had to do, what was involved?

GG: Wow wow of course we had I think forty employees.

RR: Okay.

GG: I think ...to run that operation was um I think...lunch five days a week, dinner seven nights a week, ...no holidays, but it was fun because um I'm an extrovert.

RR: Yes.

GG: And so I love talking to people and meeting customers and um servicing them and um sushi became um just started to ...my mother and father opened the first sushi bar in Texas.

RR: Oh yeah.

GG: Yes and the one in Houston was only the one when they first did that was only a four-seater—it was for the Japanese consulate and some Japanese companies, but Texas came by and they looked at sushi and didn't know what it was.

RR: When did they open it?

GG: The sushi bar I think was '71 [**RR:** Okay.] yeah '71, but then when I was there in '85 ...a lot of artist would come to Houston to perform would come to my restaurant— famous artist and...and ...lot of musicians love sushi in those days.

RR: Really?

GG: Yes, artists and um and I mean movie stars and stuff like that so they come to our restaurant to eat sushi and then um I started knocking on hotels and the Astrodome to sell sushi [**RR:** Yeah.] And I delivered...I did a catering business I started a catering business.

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RR: When did you start doing sushi and catering?

GG: Ahh...probably '87. The Westin Galleria hotel was my first account—this is right next door—

RR: Yeah!

GG: It was right next door and so I just knocked on and talked to the chef and see—just...Tokyo was down the street...they needed [inaudible] just wanted you to know the California rolls are very edible um avocado and crab meat and cucumber you know it's very nutritious, high in protein, low in fats, I believe you know some of your fine clientele would like this. So they just ordered one tray or something like that and as things go on they started ordering more. And so I went to other hotels and then um...I started doing a live sushi bar.

RR: Ohhh!

GG: In those days...

RR: What do you mean live sushi bar?

GG: I had a—an actual chef there with a portable sushi bar and a hostess a girl dressed in a kimono...Japanese kimono—to help serve the sushi customers there for weddings, for birthday parties, or...

RR: So you go to their occasion and do that?

GG: Right...and then the Japanese companies—during their Christmas, they would order a live sushi bar and they would have like 300, 400, 500 people.

RR: When they were in Houston having events?

GG: Right, right...there's about ninety Japanese companies here in Houston.

RR: Oh wow! Okay.

GG: A lot of them in the energy industry or gas or um pipe and so I just started knocking on doors and um in the old days we didn't have a computer you know or internet and but we had a fax machine.

RR: Yeah.

GG: And so I would fax all these Japanese companies some of the prices and stuff like that and lunch specials you know all kinds of stuff with a fax machine I remember that and it worked!

RR: Yeah.

GG: It worked!

RR: Yeah.

GG: And so —then I worked with famous caterers like Jackson Hicks here in Houston.

RR: Okay.

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GG: I don't know if you know Jackson Hicks.

RR: I don't.

GG: Okay, well I started working with a lot of the caterers here in town and I did sushi at the Astrodome um and then um just kinda spread around people knew that I was in the business sushi.

RR: Yeah so a little word of mouth later on...

GG: Yes that worked. I did a lot of networking. I tried to use as many people as I could—I used to have a good memory remember all these names, but it's lacking now but and that's how I started the catering business.

RR: Ok so you notice that—so the demand just slowly grew over time.

GG: Yes—it's just phenomenal because just watching it grow like that.

RR: Yeah I bet. Because now sushi is so popular...

GG: I mean...It's not like a foreign food anymore.

RR: Yeah!

GG: You know, so I capitalize on that.

RR: Yeah and it initially the cliental was just like pretty elite

GG: Yes. Pretty elite-intellectuals.

RR: How would you say that has evolved?

GG: Well...How did it evolve? It think it was because the... Hollywood I would think— if you look at MTV about 10 years ago they started talking about sushi.

RR: Yeah.

GG: I mean—the artist—the artist would and then the music and then if you just— MTV got the young kids more interested in sushi. And I think what really helped was the health factor of sushi so people got very conscious about eating healthy foods., sushi is right up there

RR: Not fried or anything.

GG: Low in fat, high in protein—[inaudible] and so so people started eating sushi so...

RR: Yeah. How would you say um your other—your parents other restaurants fared?

GG: —yeah they fared real well, but they we sold them all—we sold them all and then kept the one here in Houston

RR: Focused on Houston.

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GG: Focused on Houston. And then I sold Tokyo Gardens here in Houston I think it was 1998.

RR: Okay.

GG:...and I got the contract for Continental Airlines.

RR: Ohhh.

GG: ...and I did um Houston to Tokyo flight—

RR: Oh okay.

GG: —And I do the Japanese food for that—I still do that. We just celebrate our twelfth anniversary-

RR: Wow.

GG: —So I do Japanese food in first class and appetizers and sushi too and Japanese food.

RR: Yeah. How did you decide to sell the restaurant and focus more on this other?

GG: Well the land was mos— was becoming very valuable in the Galleria—inside the loop of 610 and the restaurant was already what—thirty-something years old or forty years old or something like that. And my mother was eighty-five or something ...my dad was eighty-five—he passed away and so my mother wanted to get out of the business, yeah.

RR: Yeah. Okay it had done well and it was time to move on.

GG: Right. And the land was—we had two acres—one in the Galleria.

RR: So I bet that was a good deal.

GG: Yeah; for my mom and dad, yeah.

RR: Okay. Yeah.

GG: And so they deserve everything and ...

RR: Yeah!

GG: So, but anyway capitalize on um having um a unique type of business—a sushi business or Japanese food.

RR: Mhm.

GG: Because of the popularity.

RR: Mhm.

GG: And then um like I said I sold the restaurant and then I got the contract with Continental Air—
Continental Airlines and so I stood and continued my catering business-live sushi bars and stuff like that.

[**RR:** Yeah.] And then um...I think three years later...oh I forgot to tell you I also did first sushi bar in

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a supermarket when I was in Tokyo Gardens.

RR: I read about that.

GG: it was in Fiesta supermarkets.

RR: Oh okay.

GG: Yes, back in the '80s- '86 I think '87 I forgot about that—I had I think we had seven,, with the Fiesta.

RR: Oh wow!

GG: Live sushi bars.

RR: Ohh!

GG: Inside—but it, it didn't do too well

RR: What was the demand for sushi like in Fiesta?

GG: Yeah! Well they were trying to demonstrate the non-Hispanic demographics.

RR: Okay.

GG: They opened this big store in Clear Lake. It's not there anymore.

RR: Yeah.

GG: ...but um they tried but they had a tough time and then I kept the one on Blaylock...Blaylock on I-10
Fiesta—I kept that one, and then HEB came around—

RR: Oh.

GG: —to Houston and I knew the president of HEB here in Houston. ...Maldonado and then I'm at a
Christmas party. And he asked me what I did...

RR: So you did network for sure?

GG: Yeah and he—then a week later he invited me to a gala and my wife and I ...were opening a sushi bar
in Friendswood in HEB supermarket. Would you like to do that? And I said: 'Sure!' You know and so they
sent one of the seafood department. The director of seafood department came down to interview me. And so
we went to Starbucks and he talked to me...talked to me for about an hour. He stood up, shook my hand and
said, 'Glen, I want you to do it!' And so we opened...that was in 2002.

RR: Okay.

GG: In Friendswood.

RR: Okay.

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GG: We broke sales record that first week we were open. I think we did 20,000 or something like that.

RR: So that was the first one in an HEB. Okay wow!

GG: And the second one it broke sales records again and then 3rd one again! It kept on—it was just phenomenal ...

RR: So you finally targeted the right demographic.

GG: And ...I remember one—we opened one in South Texas and I was apprehensive. It was in McAllen, Texas—and I thought wow I don't know the demographics call for sushi down in McAllen, South Texas. I said, 'Ok I'll try even if I don't try I'll never know'. It broke sales records again! It was just unbelievable.

RR: Wow!

GG: Yeah! Honestly, it was just phenomenal [**RR:** That's amazing!] and so now I have 153 sushi bars all over Texas!

RR: Wow!

GG: Ahh...

RR: That's awesome.

GG: Isn't that something? And then um... my catering business I had universities—had sushi at Rice.

RR: Okay! Yeah that's your sushi?

GG: Mhm.

RR: I eat it all the time!

GG: Well, thank you, thank you! The student center, I think it is. Right right. I have U of H... I have it at Trinity college in San Antonio—I have it at UT Arlington... I think I have one in Arkansas I just finished in Mexico so the universities the young kids love sushi.

RR: Yeah definitely.

GG: And so I capitalize on that.

RR: Wow...So it has just grown over time like crazy.

GG: Yeah it has and it's been lucky.

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RR: Mhm.

GG: But, throughout the Houston—I've been active in the community, too and so being Asian I ...very active in the political aspect of the American-Asian American community. Trying to get more recognition at City Hall or the State or the County um there's a lot of racial prejudice against Asians... especially in ...I would say corporations and stuff like that. If you look at the Fortune 500 companies here in Houston, there's not very many Asians on the board.

RR: They call it the 'bamboo ceiling.'

GG: They call it the bamboo ceiling. I've heard of that.

GG: Right. I'm optimistic. I always you know I have lots of hope and I love life and so it's just that the reason I got involved in the community is...we need to have more Asian Americans more visible in the mainstream.

RR: Mhm.

GG: To be able to show that we're all humans and we all love our children—we're no different. You know, and it's just to try to eliminate stereotypes and that we are... or do make contribution to the community to make a better life for everybody and so I was involved in many organizations—Asian American organizations in town and um contribute a lot to the political candidates here in town also.

RR: Yeah.

GG: To have access to politician to help Asian Americans if they have problems.

RR: Mhm.

GG: But it's fun! Because you meet a lot of nice people!

RR: Definitely! Yeah.

GG: ...and so now—now I'm sixty years old ...I still belong I think in...I'm on the board in nine organizations I think right now.

RR: Okay! What um—what's on your other community involvement other than the political arena or is that your main focus?

GG: No, that's not my main focus.

RR: Okay.

GG: At my age...uh... more nonprofits, [**RR:** Yeah.] Asian society, we're building the Asia house—I don't know if you know about that.

RR: No, I don't.

GG: Well, I'm going to have to turn you on to that. It's going to open up March next year. It's a 50-million-dollar project—it's just down the street here next to the Holocaust Museum two blocks I think two blocks away from the Holocaust Museum. It's almost finished.

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RR: Wow! So what is that going to be?

GG: ...It's more of a um—I wouldn't say community center; but we're going to have galleries, art, Asian art. We have a 298-seat theater. We'll have classrooms to educate ...Houstonians about Asian culture and also educate Asians about Asian culture...so I'm involved with that and I'm on the board of United Way—

RR: Okay.

GG: —and so I've been on that for the past 6 years ...Japan American society. I've been president twice ...I started the Japanese Festival. You ever go to the Japanese Festival?

RR: I think so!

GG: At Hermann Park next to Japanese gardens, I started that seventeen...eighteen years ago.

RR: Eighteen years ago.

GG: Right, right—and I always promote—I try always all these years promote Japanese culture—

RR: Yeah.

GG: —here in Houston and of course I had selfish motives I mean. If I promote Japanese culture, then they'll like sushi!

RR: Of course, that makes sense!

GG: But seriously, I it's a lot of goodwill I try to promote here in Houston. I get people to know Japanese people. Well they say...All I want is American people to like Japanese people. I want Japanese people to like American people.

RR: Yeah yeah.

GG: That's all.

RR: Yeah, so you're pretty involved all these spheres—political-nonprofit, [**GG:** Art, arts.] arts, art, Japanese culture, Japanese community-

GG: Education.

RR: Huh...that's great.

GG: My heart belongs to business though.

RR: Of course, that's why you haven't stopped yet!

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RR: I'll bet it's still growing isn't it?

GG: Yes it is! Yes it is. I think we're opening fifteen more places this year.

RR: Oh wow that is just amazing.

GG: But, Houston's a great community um you know I think it's the people and the accessibility of leadership here in town has changed tremendously the past twenty years. Twenty years ago, —if you're in the editorial Chronicle there's no mention of Asians [**RR:** Really?]
—only black and white or Hispanic. But today...

RR: Today...

GG: Yeah, the Asian Americans are mentioned in the paper much more than it was twenty years ago.

RR: Yeah.

GG: So...

RR: That's great!

GG: I believe we're all equal—I don't think there's anything...we're all human beings.

RR: Yeah definitely.

GG: You know so...but Houston has offered me an opportunity to help people and so that's why I love Houston.

RR: That's great! Um...going back to...business—the business side—what were some of the challenges that you have faced...just in general?

GG: Well, being in the restaurant business the hardest thing is cash flow.

RR: Okay.

GG: Because of payroll, taxes, bills, and stuff like that so you're always have a hard time keeping control of your cash flow...and paying the bills

RR: Yeah

GG: And the salaries and stuff like that—I think that was the toughest part for me. I always worry.

RR: Yeah okay um-how did you get the idea to...start catering and start sushi bars and all of this stuff? How did you first get the idea?

GG: ...Wow...I ...went to Los Angeles I don't know how many years ago and they opened the first sushi bar in a supermarket in Safeway in Beverly Hills.

RR: Okay.

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GG: ...and by chance I was there—

RR: Yeah.

GG: —I just not to see the sushi bar just to—I think I wanted to buy something and I looked at this and saw a sushi bar in a grocery store you know so...and I saw a lot of people around it so that's how I got that idea.

RR: Why don't we have that in Houston?

GG: I try to promote it.

RR: Okay...let me see let me see...um—I noticed I was looking at your resume cause you had given it to us I think and um you have some other businesses too—you have a consulting business?

GG: Yes yes yes.

RR: And an international trade...

GG: Yes yes

RR: And also retail stores in the airport.

GG: Yes.

RR: So tell me a little about that.

GG: I'm a consultant for Japanese companies like Toshiba—

RR: Okay.

GG: —um being the Japanese—I knew the President of Toshiba in USA cause he opened a plant here in Northwest Houston and in those days, we were only Japanese restaurant so they all would come over to my restaurant and so I became friends with the—the officers of the company and stuff like that and then um I played golf with them and stuff like that and they knew that I knew a lot of people in Houston and so they asked me one day...uh... he chairman of all Toshiba came from Japan and wanted to meet the Mayor.

RR: Okay.

GG: So I arranged that.

RR: Hahaha...Wow!

GG: You know—so we had a meeting with the Mayor—I think it was Lanier. Bob Lanier in those days. I don't know if you knew Bob Lanier.

RR: I mean—Well I know the Middle School Lanier.

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GG: So from there I became a consultant on a routine basis—

RR: I see.

GG: ...and I helped them get involved in a United Way. They had 1000 employees and so they participated in United Way helping the community-

RR: Oh I see.

GG: —and I would time and time issues people at Shell or Exxon or...

RR: When did that first start?

GG: Phew...oh boy, '80.... '90..... [RR: Approximation is okay.] '80 something '86? '87? I think...'87

RR: Okay.

GG: My English is good so that's why I could introduce them to people that I thought were credible...um and...let me see um and the great relationships with Toshiba—they're a great company.

RR: Okay.

GG: You heard of them?

RR: Yes of course.

GG: Well, they have industrial division here in Houston not retail not the electronics consumer goods, but industrial—they make big motors. In fact they're doing the plant here that makes electric motors for the Ford Focus—it's gonna open up I think October and then they going to start another company— they're going to make the batteries for the electric cars. So truly high tech...high...so it's fun for me to be around that

RR: Yeah yeah!

GG: Being a sushi man you know?

RR: Haha... have you learned a lot about that kind of stuff?

GG: No...not just. [RR: Not really?] I'm not that smart—it's just, just too technical for me.

RR: Too technical, I understand.

GG: Yeah, that's how I did that and the consulting business as far as their retail stores in the airport...uh...it's a government contract—

RR: Okay.

GG: —and ...I was recommended by a city council member to be part of the minority contract and so um that's how I got involved in that....as far as my other business um I have um back in '80—no just about eight years ago—we used to trade with China and and had a small company with partners...and a

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Chinese partner and we would import stuff from China to help some American factories here in...in Houston so I did that went to China a couple times.

RR: Oh wow.

GG: Mhm...

RR: So um...what kind of retail stores are these?

GG: do you know theuh....gift shops, magazine, newspapers, um the managing—management companies host international so they run everything out of a silent partner inside. And we had board meetings four times a year.

RR: What is the minority aspect then?

GG: I believe the city contract for the airport for the government you need, 40% participation of minorities.

RR: On the board?

GG: Of the company.

RR: Oh okay. Interesting. Okay. So how have you found these other areas as different you're your previous restaurant catering food business?

GG: Well business is business.

RR: Yeah, it's pretty similar.

GG: Yes mostly...um I guess common sense.

RR: ...and relationships, like probably.

GG: I guess um...I'm not an accountant, I'm not a lawyer, so I'm just a basically ...I—I guess this honesty, common sense.... So don't let people take advantage of you—just be careful, that's all. Just be smart about that.

RR: Yeah, okay um...we could talk a little bit about your family life now. Um, so you've been married for thirty-seven years.

GG: Met my wife in the fifth grade when we were ten years old...

RR: Yeah. And—

GG: I have a son.

RR: huh...when was he born?

GG: He was born in '85 and he's twenty-six years old and he's just been accepted into grad school—MBA at Ross business school at University of Michigan. [**RR:** Oh awesome!] So he lives in New York and has a girlfriend I don't know—I don't think he's going to get married—I think he's...wants to finish his MBA and

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only one child.

RR: Okay.

GG: And that's my whole life, my wife's whole life, is my son... so...he's very independent. And um...uh...I think he is very smart young man.

RR: Did you try to teach him any aspects of Japanese culture while he was growing up or...?

GG: ...yes and no, but not as much as my parents taught me.

RR: Right.

GG: ...not that much, yeah.

RR: Okay.

GG: But umm....

RR: Okay.

GG: As he got older, he's shown more interest when he was a teenager, no interest.

RR: No interest...

RR: Does he like Japanese food at least?

GG: Yeah, he loves Japanese food!

RR: Good, good—that's the most important part.

GG: Right, right, right.

RR: Let me just see...how we're doing...oh we're still fine...okay um so what are some of the big lessons that you've learned throughout your professional life? I know it's a big question.

GG: Umm—I... what's a big lesson...treating people with respect um I always try to treat people equally especially when I used to deliver—I used to deliver all the food and stuff like that and so I always nice to people at the dock—I was always nice to the busboy at the hotel. I was nice to the helper in the kitchen. I always nice to the executive chef and ...and I found that being nice to people with a smileit was a lot easier anytime I'd leave, they would help me. You know, they would bend over backwards to help me and stuff like that and so I always tell never burn your bridges. You never know when...even young people like you...Don't burn bridges you never know that the other person will become the president of the United States so you never know so....uh...so that's—that the big lesson so...

RR: You mentioned the when we met—we talked about the bamboo ceiling earlier.

GG: Mhm...

RR: What advice would you give to um...an aspiring Asian businessmen or other prof—other type of professional?

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GG: ...I-I think networking.

RR: Okay.

GG: I mean if you work in a corporate atmosphere try to make as many friends and be cohorts in that company...uh...you know just so you can get support and and...you're noticed. And being noticed in a corporation with 30,000 people is very difficult and Asians are usually are very humble and um um...not so much action or I hate to stereotype it but I mean basically we're pretty much humble to excel in a corporation and.... you have to um.... kinda shine and network and be aggressive yeah I guess aggressive or—in a good way.

RR: In a good way.

GG: In a good way.

RR: Why would you say—why do you say that Asians are in general more humble?

GG: ...look at my mother and father, I guess. They were very humble.

RR: Yeah.

GG: -talking to American people or stuff like that very reserved... um...lot of the um Chinese immigrants or the Japanese immigrants at the beginning—they're very humble, very quiet and stuff like that. They didn't cause too much trouble or anything like that.

RR: Do you think it's a cultural thing?

GG: It's a cultural thing, absolutely but we live in America.

RR: So you have to change. Yeah.

GG: Yeah so I want my son to assimilate and try to climb that corporate ladder and break that bamboo ceiling and...cause that's really ...uh...an obstacle you know...and so—

RR: Mhm.

GG: Yeah and there's so many talented Asians in the corporate world. Smart too! But they get passed over management.

RR: Yeah that's true.

GG: You know and they are very talented...young kids are very talented.

RR: Definitely, definitely. Let me see what other areas I wanted to focus on...um...well what are your...goals currently personally or professionally or whichever way?

GG: What are my goals?

RR: Mhm.

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GG: Um...well...I think at my age, my wife's age is um being healthy and um staying healthy ...uh...friendship means a lot to me—being able to have a friendship ...uh...it's a goal I guess to maintain the friends I have.... it's important to me um...um. I still want to grow my business—I'm very um...um...want to do those things growing the business. I'm not *that* old I think I got—I can work 10 more years or something like that. I like...the other thing I'm proud of...giving the since I do—expand my business and creating jobs for other families and so that makes me feel good. the other goal is ...I do a lot of charity work and community....um ...I will continue to do community affairs here in Houston um I meet a lot of nice people—some of my best friends come from nonprofits. It's amazing and you see...being active and ...I tell ya...uh...you meet a lot of great people.

RR: Yeah. What are you primarily focusing on now day-to-day?

GG: Golf.

RR: Golf.

GG: That's one of my hobbies.

RR: Okay—you're a golfer.

GG: I'm a golfer and so ...I have this group for retired people I play with and ...we bet money. That same ten dollars goes around but no, um what was your question again? What were my mine ...what do I want to do?

RR: ... no...oh I said what do you, what are you primarily focusing on right now in your day-to-day life? What are you working on....

GG: I'm still networking.

RR: Yeah.

GG: I still want to meet people um different types of people, opportunities in business you know...um you want to meet people that can help you— I always try to ...make it a goal of meeting new business people—I'm talking business now and so to be able to um...have access to the leadership in the community or business leadership... causeI don't know everybody in town ...just so...uh..I enjoy that.

RR: Yes.

GG: I will continue to do that.

RR: What kind of settings do you network in or places? Events?

GG: ...My organizations like I'm on the Board of the Greater Houston Partnership. Do you know what that is?

RR: I've heard of it, but I don't know what it is

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GG: Okay, it's like a Chamber of Commerce.

RR: Okay.

GG: Okay in Houston—I'm on the board of the Convention Visitors' Bureau. This is great networking for me because I'm in the food business and ...United Way is great because the people on the board are usually presidents of companies something like that...so it's a chance to be able to know them. So the reason I say that is ...maybe someone needs a job at Shell or something like that. If I can make recommendation for a young kid have access to that—I can help a lot of people.

RR: Mhm.

GG: It's not just for myself.

RR: Of course yeah of course...I—one time I learned networking is a two way street. Each person has to.... So that's...

GG: So that's still my goals to be able to know people and you know maybe help some young kid.

RR: Yeah okay um well normally I have partners so it's a little bit easier.

GG: It's okay.

RR: ...to ask some questions. Is there anything that I might have missed asking you about?

GG: Well,

RR: You wanted to discuss when you came into this interview: you know when you were thinking of what to talk about.

GG: I would really like to talk about my mother and fathers—the pioneers because being able to open the first Japanese restaurant in Texas and be able to spread Japanese culture ...here in Texas I'm very proud of that. It was a very authentic Japanese restaurant here in Houston... we had ...Tatami rooms okay and then we had...

RR: What is that?

GG: Straw floors where you have to take off your shoes and sit down and eat and you have to fold your...legs and ate at the Japanese style and chops—you have to use chopsticks or and then we had ...Japanese dances nightly.

RR: Yeah.

GG: And we had a “equibana”.

RR: What is that?

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GG: That flower arrangement.

RR: Ok. Oh yes. Oh yes classes in arranging.

GG: Well, my mother didn't do that—one of these organizations—Japan American Society would do that. So we introduced a lot of Japanese culture and so I'm very proud of my mother and father. Being the first Japanese restaurant and ...great location in Galleria area we expose a lot of ...Japanese culture to Houstonians here long time Houstonians and so I'm very proud of my mom and dad and they worked hard you know they ...ah...you see I'm spoiled okay so I mean I go to nice restaurants they would hardly do that!

RR: Really?

GG: Well, 'cause they worked they just worked and and...sent me to school and buy me things and stuff like that so they ...very proud of my mother and father what they've done and so um...I try to be humble and respect that a lot.

RR: What do you think were some of the biggest challenges in starting the first Japanese restaurant in Texas?

GG: ...people had no knowledge that I think—there was Chinese food. Do you would come to my restaurant? Do you have like “chow mein”— or fried rice or something like that. And they would ask Chinese questions you know and they wouldn't know the difference back in those days...

RR: Yeah.

GG: Yeah and um ...it's I guess ...my mom and dad went through a lot of prejudice and um...because of the war and so ...so they had a lot more hardship than I did.

RR: Mhm—so they were also kinda educating the community [**GG:** Yes.] about Japanese culture.

GG: And so I continued that...

RR: Yeah...that's great. What kind of—what were some lessons that you learned from your parents...maybe that you realized later or that you realized at the time?

GG: Um my appreciation of Japanese culture.

RR: Okay.

GG: I mean I'm an American, okay.

RR: Exactly.

GG: But then as a teenager I thought they were old fashioned and kinda backwards and what's that word not with it or hip or whatever—when I was a teenager you know and didn't think anything of Japanese culture. I thought Japanese culture was backwards, but as I grew older I appreciate the beauty of the culture...it goes back how many thousands of centuries and stuff like that and so that's...that's one benefit I learned from my mom and dad is to appreciate the culture of Japan, but I love America though.

RR: Of course! That's, that's an important lesson. Yeah.

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GG: Um...and, and I want young people to be proud of their culture. You know, being, being proud Asian American um is nothing to be ashamed of...you know and so um I guess like I said earlier... you need to be visible in this community and have friendships with...with people—let them know that you know who you are and that will eliminate a lot of stereotypes so...

RR: Yeah.

GG: So I'm depending on young people like you to continue that.

RR: Okay! That's a big responsibility. But it's important.

GG: Yeah so.

RR: Well, anything else?

GG: I — you—you were asking me the questions, so I don't know...

RR: Yeah well.

GG: So, I apologize I...

RR: No, no—I mean you've done a great job! Being thorough and concise at the same time, so.

GG: I'm friends with um Albert and Anne Chao.

RR: Okay.

GG: Okay so I respect them very, very much.

RR: Are you going to be coming to the dinner?

GG: No, [**RR:** You're not in town?] I'm g—I'm not in town.

RR: Oh no!

GG: I have to go to Dallas—In fact, I'm leaving tomorrow—Washington, DC.

RR: Yeah, that's why you couldn't make it tomorrow.

GG: Right, right so I'm done with the delegation and visit the capital.

RR: Okay okay! Well maybe some other time.

GG: But so what happens with this? ...oral interview who—where's it—where's it go? Where's the archives or something like that?

RR: Yeah! Um...should I keep recording?

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GG: No you can finish.

RR: Okay...okay.

GG: Thank you.

RR: Well, thank you very much for um...participating in the interview. [**GG:** I hope I didn't bore you.]

RR: No, it was not—It was compl...it was very interesting! So, thank you very much for sharing the story with you.

GG: So how's this work? What's going to happen with this?

RR: Do you want to turn it off?

GG: Yeah.

[Interview ends.]