

MAURICE J. OSTOMEL  
Interview by Mareaner Applebaum  
On 10/30/88  
In Leisure world, Laguna Hills, California

APPLEBAUM. I am Mareaner Applebaum and I am taping Maurice J. Ostomel and his very distinguished career, which he has had these many years, both in Los Angeles, New York, and other places, which he will tell you about.

OSTOMEL. This recording is being done for the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California which, through its program of Social Welfare Archives, is securing information from people who have been active in the social welfare field in California.

Perhaps a little background will be useful in connection with my own role in California. I was born on April 2, 1911 in Portland, Oregon. I went to Reed College in Portland, where I secured a Bachelor's degree. A number of years later I secured a Masters' in Social Work from the Columbia University School of Social Work, which was in those days known as the New York School of Social Work. My professional career started after that with the American National Red Cross in 1942 to 1945 and in that connection I was assigned to the Pacific Area office and from the Pacific Area office, in San Francisco to several different succeeding assignments.

The first one was at the Santa Ana Army Air Base and then a year later, I became the field director at the Kearns Army Air Base, just outside of Salt Lake City. Then I became the Director of Military and Naval Welfare Services Public Relations Department for a year afterwards--out of the San Francisco Office.

My experiences in the American National Red Cross were very helpful to me since I had

specialized in administration and community organization.

In 1945, I came to Los Angeles as the Assistant Executive Director of the Los Angeles Welfare Planning Council and I was in that position from 1945 until 1957, when I went to the Jewish Home for the Aged of Los Angeles as its Executive Director and served there in that capacity for 20 years.

APPLEBAUM. Can you tell me what motivated you to go into social work?

OSTOMEL. Yes, I can. There were two important considerations. One was that, years earlier, when I was in college and in high school, I was active in the community center and at that time I read about professional social work, which was just beginning to be professionalized. Also my wife in Albany, New York-I had married her there in 1934--was the assistant director of the Albany Welfare Department and I had become interested in welfare because of her activities.

I decided to go to the New York School of Social Work and get a degree in social work. While I was there, I had some very interesting experiences, including a field work placement at the Social Security Administration office on Wall Street, and I had a community organization placement in the Bronx Council of Social Work. These had a very important influence in my further career.

I gave you the background connected with my education and my work experiences to give you a little information about how I became interested in some of the special things in which I feel that I have made some contribution to social welfare in California. For example, at the Welfare Planning Council, I was assigned early on to staff a community committee on the aging, and this became a very deep interest of mine. Fortunately, I was able to recruit into the committee some very prestigious people, including past

presidents of the Bar Association, prominent attorneys, prominent lay people and officers and, also, Doctor Ethel Percy-Andrus, for whom the Gerontology Center at USC is named.

At the Planning Council, in connection with my work on the aging (and it was quite extensive), one of the special projects was a study of welfare for the aged in California.

When we had concluded our work, I had called George Wyman, who was on our committee and who was the Director of the State Department of Social Welfare, to be one of the several people who would present our findings in a public meeting at the Biltmore Hotel. A few days after he agreed that his calendar was free and he could come, he called me and said, "Would you mind if I got a substitute", and I said, "Well, George, what have you got in mind?" He said, "Well, Governor Goodwin Knight wants to come and make the presentation that I would otherwise make because he is especially interested in presenting to the public the importance of the Legislature's enabling legislation that would allow California to take advantage of the Eisenhower Medical Assistance Program. That had been one of the key recommendations of our committee and Governor Knight came and made that presentation, and subsequently, the legislature passed enabling legislation in California, which then had a medical assistance program for elderly people and other people as well.

Also, one of our recommendations was the establishment of a conservatorship program in California, and that was also passed by the Legislature. That was one of the things that I think was useful in connection with my staffing the Committee on Aging of the Welfare Planning Council.

There are several other activities there that may be of some interest. One was in

connection with what was known as the Capital Expenditures Committee of the Planning Council, which I also staffed, and which was composed of very prominent architects and builders and people who were connected with that kind of work. The first responsibility of staff, when an organization asked for approval of a projected building program, such as a hospital or Boy Scouts or what-have-you, the Welfare Planning Council had a procedure of certifying the social need and desirability of that project. It was my responsibility to see to it that the appropriate division or body in the Council looked into that aspect of the proposal and then, when they had completed their work, I would convene a meeting of the Capital Expenditures Committee and these men would look at the building proposals. Usually the petitioners came in with their board members and their architects or engineers and showed us the plans that they had for these projects.

Sometimes we were able to be very useful to these people. I remember in one instance a hospital came in with a program for expansion of a several story building that was to be right next to the existing hospital. Their plan was to have the first two stories for outpatients and then eventually to add additional stories above them for inpatients; and it had to be tied in with the existing hospital. Our specialists; the architects and builders, pointed out to them that in their planning they had not really taken into consideration what was necessary. If they were going to have an in-patient program for example, they had no way for getting food from the kitchen in the old building into the new building. There were other things that were mentioned to show that they had not really thought this thing out as well as they should have.

Shortly afterwards, we received congratulations from the members of the hospital's

board for having helped them define some things that were important to them in their building program. Now, one of the reasons that our certification and approval of the project was this: there was in California what was known as the California Capital Building Fund, and this was a program whereby corporations in the Los Angeles Area contributed into the fund and then, if the Capital Expenditures Committee approved a project, there would be an allocation of a substantial amount of funds to the organization. So we had a little leverage on the organization; if they were Community Chest organizations they had to get approval, but even if they were not Community Chest organizations, they wanted to get approval because they wanted to get the money from the building funds organization. Those are two of the things that relate to my experience in the Welfare Planning Council.

While I was at the Planning Council I had occasion to be active professionally out in the community and those experiences may be of some interest to you.

When I first came to Pittsburgh and one or two other communities, they were organizing the association for the Study of Community Organization and I had the responsibility of organizing that organization in the Los Angeles area and became its first president. I was also active in connection with the American Association of Social Workers in a number of capacities.

APPLEBAUM. Weren't you president at one time?

OSTOMEL. Yes, but I'll get to that in a minute.

APPLEBAUM. Alright.

OSTOMEL. This was the American Association of Social Workers and I was Chairman of their Civil Service Committee and on their board and in that connection, worked very

closely with the Civil Service authorities in Los Angeles County and helped provide questions for written examinations and oral examiners for oral examinations in the various areas and civil bodies in the Los Angeles Area.

I was also active as the chairman of what was known as the TIAA Committee when, in the mid-40s and early-50s, there was an effort made to bring together all the different professional social work organizations. We had a generic group known as the American Association, and we had a group of medical association members, and group work association members and the school of social work members, and so on and so forth.

In the effort to bring the organizations together, each area was also commissioned to bring these organizations into one body and I became the chairman of the committee designated to do that. After we had worked out arrangements for consolidating the different organizations, we became the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and I served as their first president.

I was also active in a number of conferences on the aging and social welfare and other matters of the California Conference and the National Conference of Social Work and in connection with RSW (Registered Social Workers). California was the first to have a program urging social workers to become registered as social workers. It was a predecessor to eventual licensing. Governor Earl Warren appointed me to the Board of Social Work Examiners which conducted these examinations to have people as registered social workers, and Governor Goodwin Knight reappointed me, so I served 12 years on the Board of Social Work Examiners and in that connection, for a number of the years, I was the chairman. We rotated some of the officer positions on that Board.

I also served as a field worker instructor for students from the School of Social Work at USC, so that while I was at the Council I had a number of those students, one after the other, who studied with me the field of community organization.

APPLEBAUM. Maury, I'm wondering, what did you do that was innovative when you left the Council to go to the Jewish Home for the Aging?

OSTOMEL. Well, I'm glad you asked that question. One of the reasons I went to the Home was that I had become very familiar with the whole subject of gerontology and it intrigued me that here was an opportunity not only to be interested in the subject from a theoretical point of view, but also to have an opportunity to bring additional services to the people who were being served. I felt very gratified in being able to do that while I was at the Home.

APPLEBAUM. Did you start in Boyle Heights--I think that was the original Old People's Home for the Jewish people--or did you start in the Valley?

OSTOMEL. No, I started in 1957 at Boyle Heights and that was the original Old People Home of the Jewish Community. While I was there, I did recognize that the facilities were not large enough to take care of the demand. We had a large waiting list, we also did not have enough area for nursing care, and we did some innovative things in the interval until we were able to find another place and I'll tell about that in a minute.

One of the things we did at the Home when I first came there was to review some plans that had been under discussion for a recreation building, and I was able to further those plans to the point that such a building was completed and we had an opportunity for our residents to have some outlets for their creative activities.

I remember one little incident: there was a lady who had come with her husband to our

community some 20 years ago and then her husband died. Then she came into the Home. Well, once she came into the Home, we discovered that she and her husband had been in the garment business, and they were very familiar with that work, and I was able to get sewing machines and she was able to establish a kind of a little plant for those who were interested. Among the things they made were thousands of garments which they sent to the children of Israel. They were very proud that they did that. We also set up a work program so that people could get a little pay for doing some work. We got factories that wanted simple assembly work and we got contracts to have those assembly jobs taken on by the residents of the home and they did that. We also had what we call a residents incentive program and we had quite a number of residents who were volunteers in doing a lot of different things and they got paid five or ten dollars a month just to show that what they were doing was worthwhile. For example; somebody would staff the library, and somebody would be responsible for folding linens. There was a lot of satisfaction in seeing that the residents had a sense of satisfaction. Also, it was important to help residents by facilitating their being able to carry on.

I was able to get the Fire and Welfare Departments to authorize us to have residents who needed to have walkers and wheelchairs and who were therefore technically nonambulatory, able to stay in their rooms by having outside exits from their rooms; they could continue, therefore, to be a part of the residential community.

Then we also were able to establish one floor at a lower level of our nursing care unit so that we could have residents there who were supposed to be pre-nursing and could get services on that floor without having to go over to the main dining room.

We had also established a clinic on the lower level and I was very proud of the fact that we were able to recruit quite a number of medical and other specialists to assist us with residents so that we didn't have to transport them to the doctor's offices and other places. For example, a dentist would come; there was a dental chair and he could take care of people. A podiatrist would come who could take care of the foot needs of individuals; and we had the regular medical staff who could see the people without our having to take them to various doctor's offices and clinics and such places like that.

Those are among some the things that we did.

There was one little incident that may be amusing: the Jewish Community Center on the Eastside was closed, but there was a group of seniors who were still active in a program and they had a staff member who was serving that group. But they didn't have a place for their operations, and we arranged for them to use our main dining room for their programs once a week. I remember an interesting little sidelight. Those people were rather younger than our people and they enjoyed dancing. Just a few of our people participated and I was a little nervous that perhaps one of them might have a heart attack when they were dancing. Well, I grabbed a hold of our psychiatrist, Dr. Ruskin, and I said to him, "What do you think about this?" He said, "Is there any better way to die than while you're dancing?" which I thought was a very interesting insight into the way we should treat our people in connection with this program of dancing.

My wife and I also had an experience with a couple. Before I tell about that I should tell about one other thing. We had a waiting list and it bothered me; we were able to arrange to rent some rooms in an adjacent apartment building where we put couples. We had to be sure that there were two people so that in case of emergency, one could

report about the other. We sent staff over there to do housekeeping on a regular basis just as they did housekeeping for our residents. We made sure that there was a telephone in each of these rooms so that the residents there could be in touch with us in case it was necessary. Among these couples, one was an officer of our Residents Council. I was very insistent that we have a resident council and it was very helpful both to get ideas from residents and that they have an outlet to squawk. There were always some of those who just want to squawk.

A little sidelight: I learned that people who come to the Home bring with them what they have been. If you have been a very giving, caring, loving person, you're that kind of person when you're ten or fifteen and when you're 60, 70, 80 and 90. If you've been a person who is very negative about life, you continue to have that kind of attitude and expression when you become an old person and when you come into the home. I want to tell you about a little incident. I was active also in working with the support groups, but one of the support groups was having a program in a hotel in downtown Los Angeles and asked us if we would bring a couple of residents to participate. So my wife and I picked up a couple of people who were prominent in the affairs of the Home. One was an officer of our Resident Council. We picked this couple up and took them to a downtown hotel where this auxiliary from the San Fernando Valley was having a program. Well, in the course of the evening, there was dancing after the program, and this couple had a great time dancing. But my wife and I were tired, and we were ready to go home and they were still full of pep and going strong. We commented on that as just a little sidelight here.

Of these residents who had come into the Home, some were quite capable.

Incidentally, the gentleman involved was also a supervisor of our work program. He had been in some business occupationally and managed other people and was good at that sort of thing.

In connection with the auxiliaries and supporters of the Home, I did find it was important to connect up with these organizations and one of the most prominent was the Guardians, a men's group. I found that through the Guardians, and they were substantial contributors to the deficit of the Home, we had several programs in which volunteers were needed and as well as suppliers of different goods. For example, on the sewing program we had instituted, I called a gentleman who had been in the garment business, on suggestion of one of our board members, and he saw that we got sewing machines donated to us so that we had them for our program. Well subsequently, when we had a capital building campaign, I appealed to this gentleman and he gave us a very substantial amount, as did others whom I had connected with the Home.

In 1957, when I went to the Home, there were about 300 people who were served by the Home, but we had a waiting list because of the shortages of services for people, I had worked with our board, and the board had agreed that we should try to find some additional physical facilities to take care of our people. These apartments were only a very small and temporary solution to this project. I was able to find a place in the San Fernando Valley with quite a number of acres; it had on it a specialized hospital for 48 people. The doctors who had started this program had run into trouble; I think they were fighting among each other. Anyhow, it was in bankruptcy and we had some very prominent people on our Board who were able to purchase this facility through the

Bankruptcy Court. I arranged with the Health Department to license that building for 54 nursing care beds, which was what we needed very much. Also, to work with the board, I arranged for an architectural firm to develop plans, to develop a total program for this site, I think it was nine acres, if my memory is correct. At any rate, we were in the process of building this program at the time that the federal program, known as a Hill-Burton Act, but became available. Under this, nursing care units and hospitals could be partially financed through federal and state monies. It took a lot of paperwork, but I was able to get a grant from the federal and state governments--several hundred thousand dollars--for an additional nursing care unit planned for and developed on that site.

While I was at the Home, I had been helpful in affiliating other groups with the Home for the Aged. These included the Jewish Club of 1933, which consisted of German and Austrian refugees, and the Workman's Circle. It happened that the Jewish Club had some people who had been able to bring some funds with them to this country and one couple, the Newmans, had a trust program, with the Home as the eventual beneficiary. It happened too, that these two people passed away while we were in process of developing plans for the Valley Home and this couple's, legacy to the Home was well over a million dollars. That, with the Hill-Burton money, and our drive for capital funds, made, us able to add a nursing unit of 48 beds in what was known as the Newman Building, a portion of which was designated for the Jewish Club. One section was also designated for the Workman's Circle, which was a new group in our organization. Well, we did have a successful capital campaign and raised quite a bit of additional money. We were able to build these structures and add to our capability to serve about

200 additional people roughly; I don't remember the exact figures now, but something like that for this project.

There is a little sidelight on this. Just about a year ago--and I've been retired since 1977--we learned that the widow of the gentleman who had provided the sewing machines at my request, for the Home, and contributed several thousand dollars to our building fund for our Valley Home, had given the Home, through the Guardians, about three and a half million dollars, a substantial sum of money. They have now named the Valley Home, the Eisenberg Home in his memory.

I feel very happy about what has happened because it does show the results when you have a good connection with other people.

I remember that I used to go to the Guardian Board meetings every month, and there was a member of their board, Ben, who frequently sat with me. I felt very good that here was a man who had the well being of the Home in his heart. His widow administering his foundation, found it in her heart to give this grant to the home. So this tells you a little about the satisfactions that I had in this connection.

In 1982, my wife and I moved to the Leisure World in Laguna Hills and when we came, those who had known of my activities with the Home, wanted to enlist my advise in connection with developing facilities here in Orange County. Lo and behold, I was on a committee that was exploring this work, and then I was told about a possibility of a purchase of an existing building to become a Home for the Aged for the Orange County Jewish community. This property was purchased a couple of years ago and it became a heritage point--Orange County's Jewish Home for the Aged and, also, for those from the Long Beach area who felt closer to Orange County than the other area.

I have been serving, along with my wife, on committees that help develop admission policies for this Home and am now on their Admissions Committee as a reviewer for their scholarship program. I want to talk a little about their scholarship program because this phase came from myself and my wife and has now been incorporated in the program.

To begin with, the Orange County Jewish community has some very well-meaning individuals who were supportive in starting and initiating this program and in financing it very substantially. So it was possible to purchase a home, which the Avon people had built. This was one of several they had built throughout the United States and then decided they were not going into the retirement business. They sold these facilities and the facility that was purchased in Mission Viejo, was one that was purchased actually at about two-thirds of the cost of building this program.

Well, the attitude of those who were in the position to set policies was that this should not be a charity home with the stigma that the old fashioned homes had in reference to that. Individuals were not going to give all their money over; for the most part, it was going to be for people who could afford to pay and for some who needed rental assistance--the term for those who couldn't pay their way.

It happened that the Japanese who had purchased the old *Boyle Heights* home from the Jewish Home for the Aging, had started a program there for their retired people and they gave scholarships for the people who couldn't pay their way. My wife and I thought that was a very apt expression for people who couldn't pay their way and we persuaded the people at the Jewish Community who were in charge of this particular Home, and the board members, that the word "scholarship" was a very proper word for

people who needed this assistance. We have been sitting on the committee that judge these people, helping develop criteria and so on for the people who cannot pay their way. I am happy to say that a percentage of those who are in this heritage point, are those who cannot fully pay their way.

When I was at the Volten Home, I was active in connection with the other nonprofit homes for the aging: we exchanged information that was helpful to us in personnel practices; what we should be paying our employees; and a lot of different ways. We had Southern California Association of Homes for the Aging and I was president at one point.

One day we were having an executive committee meeting of our officers and one of our officers was Dr. Andrus, whom I had mentioned earlier. There was a Teacher's Home and she was connected with that Home. She told us at this meeting, that she had been appointed by President Eisenhower to be on a national committee to help establish a White House Conference on Aging. She said many organizations connected with the elderly were going to be represented at that conference and wasn't it a shame that the nonprofit Homes were not so represented. Why shouldn't we form an American Association of Homes for the Aged and have our present officers become the officers of that organization, write to our counterparts throughout the country, and get them to become members; we subsequently did that. So that was the beginning of the American Association of Homes for the Aging, and I was the delegate of the American Association to the White House Conference on the Aging called by President Eisenhower. It was a very productive program. One of the things that came out of it was a very controversial and hard fought-over proposal for the establishment of

Medicare. Medicare was stimulated very substantially by the recommendation with about a six to four vote in this Conference for the establishment of a national medical program for elderly people; I was in on that very interesting program.

Another little sidelight: I sat in sessions with other people who were connected with homes for the aging throughout the country, and I found some interesting differences in definitions of what a Home for the Aged was. In some communities nursing homes were called homes for the aged and in some communities they had reimbursement of medical assistance on the basis of several different categories or levels of services. All these things reflected differences in our country in the way various states approached the financial obligations of the state in reference to people who were medically needy. My wife and I have been active with the University of Southern California School of Social Work because we have felt that the training of social workers is very important. One of the problems is that many of the people who want to become professional social workers with a graduate degree (incidentally, my wife Anne has a graduate degree from USC in social work) do not have the financial wherewithal to get their degree. We have been active in helping develop four year scholarship programs for individuals who are in this category and, on our 50th anniversary, we established the Arlien Johnson Scholarship Fund and helped raise some money for it, and it is partially funded now. We hope that over the years it will become fully funded but it is one of those things we have been working on, and every year, we are supportive of the School in connection with their scholarship program. We have also worked in connection with their archive program because we feel it is important to get to people who have made a contribution, and we're including lay people, as well as professional workers in this category. The

Archives is in process of going to various individuals who have over the years contributed importantly to the program. One of the people who was interviewed in connection with this project is Charles Schottland who is a former director of State Department of Social Welfare of California.

I must tell you a little story about Charles Schottland and myself that I am rather proud about. Mr. Schottland was appointed by the Eisenhower administration to go to Washington and to be on the staff in connection with their program. I said to Charlie, wouldn't it be nice if the President of the United States sent a letter of congratulation to every person when they became 100 years of age. Charlie said, "It's a good idea," he did talk to Eisenhower, and it is now a program. So when you become 100 years old according to the Social Security records, that has nearly everybody who is in this country, you are going to get a letter from the President of the United States congratulating you on getting to be 100 years of age.

APPLEBAUM. I never knew that--- this is something new.

OSTOMEL. Before we came to Leisure World, my wife and I were also active in a volunteer program in Pasadena for the San Gabriel Valley, or a substantial portion of it, known as RSVP--that's Retired Senior Volunteer Program. We were on the Advisory Board; we met in Pasadena, and we stimulated the individuals who were elderly people, to be volunteers in hospitals, nursing homes, community centers and all over, to do a lot of things. We found some interesting things; that public agencies are now also developing volunteers as a part of the way in which they operate.

APPLEBAUM. Maury, cause I've known you many years, this was a very interesting recital of the many activities that you've had in your life: a lot of interesting ones

particularly, and meaningful ones. I know SC and the California Social Welfare Archives will be very pleased with your real contribution to them. Thank you.

OSTOMEL. And I want to thank you for interviewing me, so I had a chance to tell you of these very things. I got pleasure out of doing so. Thank you again.

## ABSTRACT

Maurice Ostomel had a particularly distinguished career as a social worker, mostly in southern California following the earning of an MSW from Columbia University. With his wife Anne, an MSW degree holder from the University of Southern California, he engaged in a wide range of activities related to their professional interests. In this interview, he describes his professional career, noting some of the special contributions he effected. After three years of work with the American Red Cross in several Army posts during WWII, the Ostomels moved to the Los Angeles area where he became the Assistant Executive Director of the Welfare Planning Council...In this role, he made substantial contributions to the planning and implementation of social welfare programs in the Los Angeles region and, at the same time, became involved in various aspects of the field of aging. This precipitated his entrance into the domain of aging in 1957, when he became the executive of the Jewish Home for the Aged in Los Angeles, whereas he remained as a paid professional until his retirement in 1980. He describes the development of that institution's funding and services, his participation in the first White House Conference on Aging, and other activities in the interests of the aging population. Following his retirement, he continued his activities as a volunteer in the area of aging, helping to establish a home for the aged in Orange County, and engaging in a range of other volunteer activities to which he applied his considerable professional skills. He was an active supporter, also, of the USC School of Social Work, where he and his wife created a scholarship endowment. Likewise, both served the California Social Welfare Archives as invaluable members of the board of directors and then of the CSWA's Advisory Council. Maurice Ostomel died on March 14, 1998.