

Liz Kovacs Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 06/07/1978
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Liz Kovacs was the daughter of a serviceman in the United States Navy who was stationed in Guantanamo during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This interview focuses on Kovacs' recollections of living on the Naval base in Guantanamo and of the base being evacuated during the crisis.

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Liz Kovacs– JFK #1

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Oral History Interview

with

Liz Kovacs

June 7, 1978

Waltham, MA

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

Stern: Okay. Fine. Why don't we begin with, if you could just identify yourself and tell us how you happened to be in Guantanamo in 1962.

Kovacs: Okay. Well, my name is Liz Kovacs and the reason ~~that~~ I was there in 1962 was that my father was stationed there in the navy, and we came in early 1961, and this was just part of that tour of duty. ^{And of it.} Do you want just to go up to October, 1962? Okay, ^{so} ~~well~~, things in Cuba at that time were very much sort of exaggerated in terms of being so close to Communist Cuba, which at that time ~~was~~ for the United States and I guess for most of the world, was a thorn in everybody's side, as opposed to what we wanted to do at that time.

Stern: You say that you ^{don't} think that Cuba was as, ~~was~~ going as far in that direction as, as in general the public impression was?

Kovacs: Well, not exactly. Maybe it was, ~~and~~ maybe it

wasn't, but I think it was only, um, two years after the revolution itself...

Stern: That's right.

Kovacs: and I think that the people were still wondering exactly what was going to happen there...

Stern: Right.

Kovacs: ...was the government actually going to last, what the people were actually doing, the state of Cuba, was it better or was it worse.

Stern: Yes.

Kovacs: the only thing that we saw on our side as Americans were that the Cuban people who did work on the base in service capacities: bus drivers, gardeners, maids, maid services was available to everybody on the base and so we saw Cuban people come. They came on every morning and some of them slept over in different quarters, but most of the women did, but they returned in the evening and we would hear through them a lot of, sort of horrible stories about what life was like on the other side. For example, we had this one woman that was working for us; She was Jamaican. I don't know how she got to Cuba or how she ended up working out of the Communist side. But one morning she didn't come to work and her daughter who taught at the base came to the house and she was very hysterical and she said: "Well, my mother's been thrown in jail" and this and that and we never heard

what happened, ^{and} We never heard from her again or what exactly ~~what~~ the consequences were. A lot of times things like that would happen to the workers. I remember some time this one woman whose little girl was sick and they wanted to ^(unintelligible) send ^{and} somebody on the base wanted to send back with her some pills or some kind of medication for her, but we heard that it was really hard to do this, ^{and} The things had to be hidden because when the busses would cross back to the other side, the women and the men and everybody would be stripped down completely. If anything was found on you, you would have a lot of repercussions. I've also heard that payment was made in American dollars but that when they got back to the other side payment was made in Cuban dollars which ^{was} at that time ^{was} thirty-five cents of the American dollar, so they were ^{losing} virtually the rest of that amount.

So, we heard things like this, and also our water supply at that time was maintained through the other side, and we had different water conditions like on certain days you could wash your clothes and your lawn and your car. But only, I think two days a week that that could happen and ^{would} that they ^{and} were patrolling ^{and} if you were washing your car, your lawn, ^{and} any other days you were subject to a fine. And they had different water conditions that were announced at one point. If it ^{was} ~~were~~ really severe

you ^{really} couldn't wash anything, just drink. I don't think that ^{that} you could even bathe, but ~~this~~ didn't happen too often. //.

Stern: Did this depend on the way that the water was being regulated from ^{the,} ~~from~~ the other ...?

Kovacs: From the other side. I think you had ^(unintelligible) to, ~~had to~~....
Now I think they're de-salinizing it. They do their own thing, but at that time they were paying for this to be done and the ^(unintelligible) water was coming from the other side and so things had to be regulated.

Stern: Did you and your family ever get over into // off the base into Cuba proper?

Kovacs: No. We would ride to the gate and ride back.

[Laughter] There was like no crossing over at least at that time. Also, if you wanted to leave Cuba, you could not ~~just~~ ^{just} leave and fly to Miami or fly from Miami back ^{back} because my grandparents were living there at that time ^{back} to Cuba because there weren't any commercial airliners that could land ^{on} at the base. So we had to take a military hop to either Puerto Rico generally, then change over, and take a commercial flight into Miami. And if you were flying back you had to do the reverse. So getting in and out was really strictly prohibited, I guess, to personnel who had to either be there or So, things were pretty fairly regulated so you had a view of people on the other side, ^{or at least of this} the new government on the other side as being really

not too fair, and I guess the whole, the general view of the country at that time was that it was sort of a very tricky kind of a situation. So, a lot of times we, ^{really} didn't really know what to expect, or what would happen. But I guess at that time since I was only eight, the threat of something happening or ^{really} really going wrong, didn't matter that much or wasn't really an all-consuming thing, because we were technically ⁱⁿ on an American base and we were living like Americans. There were swimming pools and beaches and ^{any} everything else that you can do in a tropical climate to help, you know .|.|..

Stern: Did you have complete access, for example, to media from the States? I mean, newspapers and television I suppose you could pick up.

Kovacs: ^{Yeah} ~~Yes~~ there was one T.V. station, no commercials, and they got all the situation comedies that came in from the States at that time, and they would have a million and one repeats because most of the time if they didn't get another reel, they would show the same thing for .|.|..

Stern: That raises certain interesting possibilities. Was the Cuban government ever able to interfere with the transmission of radio and television?

Kovacs: Not that I remember. At least not on the T.V. station that we watched, and it was only on for certain times, and so it was a very limited kind of

thing. I don't even remember that happening. We had a newspaper that they printed news from the States, and at that time a lot of people like [Chet] Huntley and [David] Brinkley and a lot of different newscasters made little jaunts down to visit and also to report back what was happening. ~~It was kind of a very popular place to go down and also to report back what was happening.~~ It was kind of a very popular place to go down and do a story on, I guess. So, and entertainers would come down. So the communication with the States, really, I didn't feel that cut off, and it was an American system and American government. The schools, you know, were base schools and taught by American teachers and this and that, and, so we.... That's generally how life was, although very closed. Like I have since talked to my mother and she said, "I almost went stir crazy on this very small base." I guess for older people it must have been really difficult to keep busy and keep reminding yourself that you are on this very small island. But for kids it was sort of a paradise, really. You could swim every day after school. You could ride busses for nothing. You ^{could get to} go everywhere you wanted because there really wasn't the threat that anything would happen to you because you were really in a kind of closed environment. Coming back to the States and fitting into a classroom and not being able to ride busses and having to pay for a lot of things was really a

shock when I got back here. But there were other limiting things. Like a lot of our produce came in from a boat. ^(unintelligible) They would bring it down from New York and Miami and a lot of times it wouldn't come in so you ^{id} would be stuck without fresh fruit, milk, sour cream, cottage cheese, and a lot of ^e our basic staples, and ^{that} so when you got back to the States you would go shopping and you would hoard ... every-thing.

Stern: There was no ^{...} nothing that would come across from

Kovacs: ... everything
Cuba proper?

Stern: ... nothing at all that would come across from Cuba proper?

Kovacs: Not that I know of. Nothing, except people that were,

^{they were} that were working there. I think ~~that it was~~ just completely closed off. I can remember talking to people down there that had been there before, um, the revolution ^{occured,} happened and they had crossed back very freely evidently but that sort of stopped ^{so} so it became sort of like a closed-in place. You really didn't know what was happening on the other side and that was sort of how you viewed it. It was sort of a place of mystery. And there were also stories of Cuban women ^{that} who had swam ^a or had tried to swim from the other side all the way across Guantanamo on rafts. Some people drowned, some people made it. Some people made it holding, like, their kids on their backs, some little babies. So you heard these stories. I don't know if any of them were true but I guess they must have had some validity.

So ^{let me} when you come up to October of 1962, And, so we ^{we} were all sitting in class one day, and it was like mid-morning, and you could sort of tell that something was amiss because teachers were running in and out of the classroom and the secretary came in and she kept re-assuring us that nothing was going to go wrong and kept handing out candy. And we kept looking out the window and it was ^{very} still and, um, you sort of had the feeling that something was going to be happening, but you didn't know what. Probably just another drill or something like that. But they let ^{us} they dismissed ^{us} up to go home for lunch which they usually did and, as we were driving home, there were suitcases on everybody's lawn, which we thought was kind of peculiar, but then we thought, well, maybe they just did this practice deal and we had to see how fast you could pack your suitcases and that's why probably they are sitting on the lawn. But I got home and I opened the door and my mother said "We're leaving in about five minutes. Go up to your room and take anything you can carry," which was kind of a very strange thing because you walk into your room and you say, "well, what do I take? What can I carry?" You have this whole room full of dolls and teddy bears and books and you just don't know what to do. So I did just

that I took everything I could carry, and we got outside and there were busses that were coming around to pick up people. Now, evidently, people with older children had left earlier because they had had to close ^(unintelligible) the older high schools before then and pregnant women that were due around that time, ^{-- even not around that time --} were flown out of Cuba. They did ^{n't} want to put them on the boats. And couples that had, or women with very small babies, eventually, when they got on the ship, got cabins to sleep in. But I was eight and my brother was three so, when we got on the ship... Well, it was sort of a very tearful thing because all the men stayed behind. We did not know what was going to happen to them. ^{You know} We had ^{were} people who had...

Stern: Did you know at this point what was happening? Did you have any conception of what the crisis was about?

Kovacs: Well, my father just said that we had, that we ^{we} were going to Miami because that's where my grandparents were, and we had to leave and something about missiles, and that we didn't want to get... Not that they were going to go off, but it was a precaution and that's why we had to leave. Well, I just accepted, I really wasn't that surprised because we grew up in an atmosphere ^{where different} in which things could happen at any moment. We didn't know exactly what that would be, and so I said: "Oh, all right. I guess." Every-

body was leaving, I mean the whole base was, and so it wasn't like, well, I'm going but I'm leaving all my friends behind or ~~like~~ I'm going and I'm leaving all the ...you know...the whole ~~thing~~ thing. Everyone was just trying to get out as fast as they could. So, we got on the ship and there was a lot of crying and a lot of...and people, older people who had more of a sense of what was going on were very upset. And I can remember waving good-bye, can remember people taking pictures, and ...

Stern: You left your father behind?

Kovacs: Yeah, yeah, and, um, I didn't know how long this was going to be. I just assumed ~~that~~ it wouldn't be very long and we would be back ~~the~~ next week. But, we got on board and we ended up downstairs on one of the very lower decks because we weren't young, my mother wasn't pregnant, we weren't, no one had a physical disability. So we ended up in ^{these} ~~the~~ bunk beds that were like four up. And then, next to you, and there were four down and you were practically sleeping on top of people and there was absolutely no privacy. And I remember the woman next to me was crying because her mother was down on the base. I don't know how they ended up down there but her parents owned a farm down there, and schools would go for field trips and visit this farm. She refused to leave. So she didn't know whether her mother had

gotten off or hadn't gotten off and she was like very, she was crying and this whole thing. And there was another woman who was trying to bring back one of the Cuban women who was helping her in her house. She was trying to sneak her off ~~of there~~ ^{with her} and they realized that that had happened and there were skirmishes and they were trying to get her off; The woman was so fearful of going back and different skirmishes like that. So, it was just about what you could carry on the bunk and that was it.

Stern: And you went directly? How long did it take before you were off Cuba?

Kovacs: Just immediately. That evening before dinner everybody pulled out. And feeding the people in such an emergency was quite a thing. There were a lot, very, very long lines and a lot of the food was just staples that they had - army rations. It wasn't really that appetizing. But I can remember we did go to dinner that one night and we were sitting around and they interrupted the whole process of ~~screaming~~ ^{Screening} mothers and ~~screaming~~ ^{Screening} kids and ~~scream-~~ ^{Screening} ing everybody and this immense confusion and said.... Although people were.... I think military people can cope fairly better than, I don't know, it seems other civilian people could in a crisis situation. They're fairly together; So there wasn't a sense of total panic. At least I didn't get that, although there was a lot of confusion. People seemed to be

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holding up really well. And so President Kennedy broke in to the dinner and made his speech to all of us. You know: "I'm really sorry that you have to leave but this is the only thing that we could do..."

Stern: Was he speaking live?

Kovacs: Yeah. He was speaking through the intercom. I don't know how they had meshed it in.

Stern: Oh, I see.

~~Kovacs:~~ And, um, ^{which} ~~this~~ is one of the main things I remember when I think back on him and that whole time. And ~~it was~~ really because, maybe ~~it was~~ because it was a personal touch. But he spoke for a while and we finished dinner. The trip took us to Norfolk, [Naval Base, Virginia]. We all went to Norfolk, Virginia, because ^{that} ~~there~~ was ^(unintelligible) a main naval base there and we were just....They didn't want to land in Miami or Florida. And we realized that when we phoned my grandparents from Norfolk. ^{The only reason they didn't do that is they were afraid Miami was going to be hit, or targeted or something. So, they brought everybody up to Norfolk Virginia.} And during the trip it was sort of like a holiday, especially if you were a kid. I mean, you didn't have school. You didn't have, you know, you were out. There were different drills with life preservers that turned out to be really funny and everybody got up. And things were pretty peaceful, you know, ^{ah} ~~and, um~~.... They kept warning us about different things, you know, don't go on deck in the evenings, don't do this, don't do that.

But we finally made it to Norfolk and it was really then that you realized that this ^{is really} was a crisis or that people were ^{really} worried about this because you had T.V. cameras all over the dock. People were taking pictures and all these different news channels from Virginia and, and, people flashing all these things. And another thing that I really remembered is that we left with no winter clothes. We had like sun suits on and this was like ^{the} end of November in Virginia and it was really cold and people were just standing on the decks just freezing. But ^{is} what happened ~~was~~ that we got off the ship. They, you disembarked by your last names and they piled you into these other busses and they took you to this huge, I don't know, I think it was a Red Cross center. And they had the same sort of thing set up with just bunk beds and emergency kits and I don't know whether the Red Cross did this or whether ~~the~~ people in Virginia did it but ^{um,} there ^{were,} people just made contributions of clothes and warm pajamas and warm sweaters; And you sort of went down and rummaged through and got your size. And then they were cooking there for a mass amount of people. And they were showing films for kids. And what happened to us, we were sort of lucky, and I think what happened to some people, is that navy people from the Virginia area came down and just went through the crowd to see if there was anybody, if they knew anybody, and we found some people that

we knew, that my parents were friendly with, and they took a couple of the families and just brought them into their house. So we left the center and then we stayed there and we went to Miami eventually because that's where our family was. And we stayed there. Well, this was the end of October. We didn't go back until after Christmas, um, simply because, I guess we could have gone back earlier but

Stern: You didn't go back to Cuba?

Kovacs: Right. But we had started school again there after about a week or two. Meanwhile my father kept sending up all our household belongings so I guess he really did think that we ^{were} eventually ^{gonna} ~~were~~ really going to leave for good, and that was it. But we stayed through to the Christmas holidays and then we returned. That was a strange situation because ^{a lot of people} ~~didn't~~ return even though maybe their orders were ^{up or this and that} ~~no...~~ So we really ended up not seeing people again, that you really knew, ^{even though} ~~and you didn't realize~~ that ~~this~~ was the last time that you would ~~be~~ seeing them.

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Stern: Was it different when you returned? Was the base any different or ...?

Kovacs: Not really. We went back into the same house. The routine started again. We left that August so it was really like January to that August. Activities were started again. I guess on an adult scale it

might have been different maybe, different impressions
maybe ^{people ./. .} ~~if you were an adult.~~

Stern: Did you ever talk to any of the Cuban people who worked on the base about the experience, about the crisis, how much they had known about it?

Kovacs: No, we never talked about that at all. One of the reasons why is that my Spanish was very limited although we were taking Spanish. And their English was enough to work by, but not really fluent, and so a lot of times you would communicate with sign language or with expressions. But there was that language barrier, and so. A lot of times they would bring us different candy from Cuba or just different things, little things to play with or things that they had brought back. But ... and they wouldn't ... but they would talk among themselves in Spanish a lot, and the language barrier was really the main problem with that. But, it just went ^{you know,} Life went on, and we ..., the whole school year ended, ^{and} We stopped ~~and~~.
They we moved on because the tour of duty was up by August.

Stern: Did your parents or any of the other people involved ^{in the evacuation} ever, ^{do you} recall ~~or do you remember~~ them ever talking about the crisis or the president's handling of the crisis? Anything of that kind?

Kovacs: Well, I don't really recall anything specific. We,

yeah, we talked about it, and my mother remembers certain details like where she was when she found out and it's ^{like} ike always, where you were at that particular moment and how, then, how she went home and she was at a bridge game or something, my father called her up and said, "You better get out of ^{here} ~~there~~ because we're going to leave and we have to be evacuated in an hour."

Stern: There's one question I ^{would} ~~would~~ kind of like to ask. I'm not sure you'll be able to answer. Do you have any idea whether the order for evacuation came before or after President Kennedy's public speech on, in other words, when he announced to the American people that there were missiles in Cuba?

Kovacs: Okay. I've read Thirteen Days since then and we were on a boat and it's very hard. I can't exactly remember how I think it came before, I ^{think} ~~think~~, because it was done very, very quickly. They ...

Stern: It would be an interesting thing to know for a number of reasons. Because that would have been a tip-off, for example, to the press that something was happening before he made his speech.

Kovacs: I'm pretty sure it was before for the simple reason that I know that they knew that there were missiles in Cuba, um, a couple of days before this happened. But, and, certain people on the base knew. I'm sure the commanding admiral knew. I'm sure the higher-ups knew, in this hierarchy

Stern: Wait, now. Let me get this straight now. You're saying that you think you were ordered ... the evacuation order came before the president's speech?

Kovacs: Yeah. I'm pretty sure. But I could be wrong because I was only eight, ^{and 1/1/1.} But the only reason I can say that is because it came very quickly and, ^{when it was given things popped very quickly and} it was ~~within~~ ⁱⁿ the space of maybe four hours, they had us off the base. Very quickly, ^(snaps fingers) done.

Stern: You don't have any specific recollection of President Kennedy's speech?

Kovacs: No. We didn't hear anything. We didn't hear it.

Stern: The major speech in which he announced to the world that there were missiles in Cuba and that there would be a quarantine? You don't remember that?

Kovacs: No.

Stern: Because if you did remember that afterward that would solve the problem for us.

Kovacs: ^{Yeah.} ~~No.~~ ^{Probably} The only reason why I don't remember is that it was probably made while all this was ^{occurring} ~~happening~~ and while we were getting out. There wasn't any T.V. on the boat. For five days you were sort of closed off.

Stern: A major effort, of course, was made to keep the fact that the United States government knew about the missiles secret until the decisions had been reached as to what to do about it. And their problem, of course, was that under the pressures of some interests, as to whether they would essentially have tipped-off the press by evacuating Guantanamo. That would almost:

have been a sure sign that something major was happening.

Kovacs: Oh, ^{right} of course, definitely.

Stern: That's why I wonder about whether or not you were evacuated or told to evacuate before or after the speech.

Kovacs: I'm pretty sure it must have ~~been~~.... Well ... I can't, I can't say. Although I have read the book and the book has filled in a lot of my gaps of what was happening decision-wise in Washington while all this was going on, and I think they found out about this possibility on October 14th and the only reason why this sticks in my mind is ~~that~~ that's my birthday. And so this is October 27th so you're going a week later when we were finally evacuated. And I'm not exactly sure what ~~happened~~ in that time interval ^(unintelligible)....

Stern: Well, that's very interesting. Do you have any other specific recollections ^{of} ~~about~~ the whole event?

Kovacs: Not entirely. ~~It's~~ it's just that I guess ~~that~~ the.... It's a very strange thing to be involved in something like that, um

Stern: There must have been a great feeling of helplessness I would assume.

Kovacs: ~~There~~ ^{It} was. But also the fact that the navy and the whole government apparatus was in full swing to, you

know, to get us out, to have this happen, to let ^{that} ~~this~~ happen. So, and it was very well carried out and very cautiously carried out. Things were just mobilized and once things started ^{getting} ~~to be~~ mobilized it just, you know, happened. The sense of confusion that I would think would be happening in a situation like that, I really didn't get that, that it really existed. People seemed to know what was going on and the whole process. There was a realization and I think maybe because this whole feeling of what Cuba was at that time and what it meant. It wasn't sort of like a volatile kind of a situation and I think ~~that~~ everyone who lived on the base, at least adults, sort of knew that at some point or another maybe something like this would happen. Whether it would be with the water supply, ~~that we'd~~ ^{we'd} ~~would all~~ have to all ~~to~~ get out or we wouldn't, we wouldn't be able to drink anything ^{more,} ~~so~~ whatever that could be. So it just happened to be, ^{you know,} a missile crisis, that whatever happened. I haven't really.... I left and I hadn't really discussed it since with people. Well, except ^{! have} ~~within~~ my own family who, of course, thought it was the right thing to do, ^{I mean your life is at stake} ~~and that really a lot was~~ ~~at stake,~~ you know, you have to get people out ~~and,~~ it's just amazing how, given a big situation like that, things can happen once they start getting mobilized and just the intense cooperation of a great deal of people. And I think ~~that~~ probably we

all have it inside of us that we don't give it in
every day. ^{Well that's} ~~A lot of people do~~ ^{because it} ~~when it isn't~~ really isn't
necessary. But when you finally reach a crisis
situation the sort of strength of humanity comes
out in your personality. And I can remember that,
you know, and ~~that~~ people were very helpful to one
another and especially when we were down on the
lower decks with all these different people. You
know, ~~there~~ ^{it} was a lot of cooperation and then
on both ends.

Stern: Well, that's very helpful.

Kovacs: That's it. And if I think of anything else ...

[Laughter]

Stern: Thank you very much.

Kovacs: Okay