RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HELEN SALERNO

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Amanda Vahabi: This begins an interview with Mrs. Helen Salerno on October 22, 2007, in Monroe Township, New Jersey, with Amanda Vahabi and …

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: … Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Thank you very much, Mrs. Salerno, for taking time to talk with us today. Just for the record, can you tell us when and where you were born?

Helen Salerno: I was born in a small town called Stirling, which is a few miles centralized between Summit, Morristown and Plainfield, more or less the center of that, in Morris County, [New Jersey]. You want to know the date?

SH: If you are willing to tell me. [laughter]

HS: August 18, 1926.

SH: Wonderful. Can you tell us a little bit about your family's history, their background?

HS: All right. My mother and father both came from a small town in Czechoslovakia. They immigrated here [when] my mother was sixteen and I think my father came later, at the age of seventeen. … My mother went into [a job as] a domestic worker … for a very wealthy family in Summit and it proved to be a boon, because they took a liking to her and taught her to read and write English, American English. My father went into the silk mills, I believe in Summit, and, … while they knew each other in Czechoslovakia, they again met when they were both here and they married in 1910. [They] lived in various places in New Jersey. My father finally settled down and, in partnership with another man in Stirling, … they began a silk business there. He bought out his partner and he built a silk mill. … Stirling proved to be [a center for the industry], actually, to have three mills … producing silk material. It was on consignment from Paterson. They would deliver the raw silk and my father and … his business would convert it into material, [and] return [it] for finalization. … My teachers used to love it, because, at Christmas, they got two to four yards of very good silk material. [laughter]

SH: Wonderful.

HS: Yes. … At the time, of course, the silk business went into decline when they established an embargo with Japan, and my father and my brothers who were working with him. … In the beginning, the mill would be running three shifts; my father would take one and each of my brothers would take the other shifts, and Mom had me, [laughter] but, then, of course, … we lost the house, but the whole idea was to save the mill. Fortunately, … Stirling was a very small place. They knew us and they enabled my parents to buy [the house] back at an auction later on, … but, in-between, my brothers went to work for the WPA [Works Progress Administration], so did my father. … Eventually, let's see, my brother Frank went into … the Army, and he went in … June 1941 [discharged December 1941 but reentered the Army in January]. My brother Bill married and he became an insurance salesman at the time, and my father went to work for the mill.

Joseph Salerno: Asbestos.

HS: Asbestos mill, in Millington. I remained in school and, … eventually, they rented out the mill. Oh, before that, I have to tell you one thing. When they lost the mill, they sold all their equipment, the looms, the warps, everything, and my mother rued to the day she died that that [the equipment] was sent back to Japan and came back in the form of ammunition for our [enemy], you know, against our boys. She always felt that, but, then, the mill was vacant and they had all these hanging electrical wires. Well, we had a ball with roller skates, because it was all oil on the floor and we could really travel, [laughter] but that was an aside. …

SH: How long did your father run the mill? You said that your mother and father married in 1910.

HS: Right.

SH: Did he serve in World War I?

HS: My father, no. He did not.

SH: That is okay. We can amend that when we do the editing.

HS: Let's see, with regard to life in Stirling, very quiet. It consisted primarily of one main road that connected from Valley Road to Long Hill Road, with side roads. My father's mill, he eventually built the house right next to the mill and we were located on a dead end street. At the time of losing the business and everything, my father and mother went into deep debt and it was due to the cooperation and niceness of our neighbors we survived. We ran up bills at the grocery store, at the meat market, the milkman kept delivering the milk every day, … and, of course, eventually, all the bills were paid, when my father and everybody got [reestablished, but their aid] enabled us to get on our footing. Let's see, I went to school in Stirling, Millington, and I graduated from Morristown High School in '44. … During the time at the high school, the government had someone in and [to] test us with regard to availability for government service. I passed that and I got a call from Lyons [Veterans Administration Hospital] asking if I'd come in for an interview, which I did, and I was accepted.

AV: Was this after you graduated? Was this in your senior year, before graduation?

HS: … Yes, just prior to graduation. Let's see, now, when I arrived at Lyons, it was primarily a psychiatric hospital. There were no women, … no secretarial or adjacent staff, on the wards. The only women there were the nurses. You could not travel throughout the hospital without an aide. In fact, I had to go to one of the wards, for what, I don't even remember, and a nude patient, completely nude, was running toward me. … Fortunately, the aide with me and the aides on the ward stopped him.

AV: What ward did you work in?

HS: I didn't work [on a ward]. Now, I'll go into that. You did not work on the wards; no secretary [did]. We worked in a huge secretarial pool. It was located on the second floor of the

administration building and in it were all the girls taking the dictation, and all the typists and secretaries, plus the secretary to the chief of professional services, and … next-door would be … the secretary to the manager and the assistant manager. The doctors would come to us … to dictate the admissions. We were receiving, at that point in time, bus loads of patients from the nearby camps, [Fort] Dix; Joe, what's the one in Plainfield, Joe?

Joseph Salerno: Edison; you're talking about Camp Kilmer.

HS: Kilmer, and … even from Pennsylvania and New York, and everything was very [controlled?]. The patients were confined to their wards. They had the opportunity, when we would be leaving the hospital around five o'clock, they would congregate at the porch and shout whatever they wanted to shout at us, which we didn't bother to acknowledge, and then, of course, the doctors were in uniform.

SH: In military uniform.

HS: In military uniform, yes, and, let's see, I'm trying to think, … okay, do you have some questions?

SH: Were you bussed into Lyons?

HS: … Well, see, I was [younger]. We were all in a group of the same age. … I turned eighteen, and [we were all] eighteen, nineteen and twenty-year-olds, and I would take the train from Stirling and we would have a group of us on the train, which would take us to Lyons. Then, we would walk to the hospital and it was fun and, if it was really bad weather, they'd send a car for us. That's primarily how all of us [commuted]. Some of them had cars, but not very often, not much.

AV: Going back, upon graduating high school, did you have any plans to further your education or go to college?

HS: … There was no chance at all. [laughter] What happened was my father wanted me to go to work in the mill and, in fact, he took my one brother out at eighth grade, after he graduated. He allowed my other brother to go to one year of high school, and then, he took him out, and then, it was only through my brothers, that they told him to let me complete my high school education, because … I was traveling by bus to Morristown and, of course, … all of us from Stirling were there.

AV: Your brothers never finished high school.

HS: No.

SH: However, they talked to your father and convinced him to let you go.

HS: … Yes. They just told him, [laughter] "You will do that."

AV: Why? Did you feel, in a sense, guilty, maybe, that you got to go?

HS: No, because … I knew better, that I had to at least have a high school graduation, … my high school education.

SH: Did your mother encourage you to continue?

HS: Oh, yes. Well, Mom, it was hard for her, because they were of the mind that you didn't need [to] and she, more or less, you know, followed my father, but, when my brothers did stand up, she went along with my brothers.

SH: I would like to back up a little bit to talk more about your family background.

HS: Sure.

SH: I know your mother and father came over separately from Czechoslovakia.

HS: Right.

SH: Did they already have family members here?

HS: My mother had her brother in Pennsylvania and my father had two sisters and a brother here, two in New York and one in Summit. So, they were able to, you know, … confirm to provide for them.

SH: Was the sister in Summit also involved in the mill?

HS: No, not at all, no, no. That was a separate entity. In fact, I didn't really know them too well until I … realized that my cousin was … working at the movie theater in Summit. … [When] we would get a group there, on the train, to Summit, he'd get us in free. So, we thought that was pretty good, [laughter] but that's the only way I met my cousin there.

SH: Were the siblings that your mother and father had here older than they were?

HS: My brother Bill was eleven years older and my brother Frank was fifteen years older. I guess I was an accident. [laughter] …

SH: Your mother's brother that was here …

HS: In Pennsylvania?

SH: Yes, was he older than she?

HS: I believe so. He was already deceased when I can remember. I only remember my Aunt Mary. So, really, I know very little and, you know, it's funny, you think you know everything

about your family, but, when your parents pass away, you realize you should have had a lot of [discussions]. You had a lot of questions you would have preferred to ask. …

SH: You said your mother also had another sibling in this country.

HS: Not my mother, my father. My father had the two sisters and a brother.

SH: She just had the one.

HS: Yes, just the brother and, of course, her nieces and nephews.

SH: Were there family members that you were aware of still back in Czechoslovakia?

HS: Oh, yes, my father had [relatives]. His mother still kept giving birth. … There was a whole family back there. In fact, when, during World War II, my brother Frank was in Europe, after the war, … he was able to … get a jeep from the pool and he drove to … Czechoslovakia, to the hometown. … He encountered this nephew who wanted to come to the United States. So, when Frank came home, he started all the papers, to provide for him, then he receives a letter from the nephew saying, no, he's [the nephew] not coming, because he just met a girl he's going to marry and she doesn't want to go. [laughter] So, that was the end of that.

SH: Did your father ever talk about what it was like for him and your mother during World War I?

HS: All I know [that] Pop talked about was Austria-Hungary; you know, Czechoslovakia was then part of Austria-Hungary. … I'm sure I've got the dates right, but, anyway, he talked about [having been] … forced to speak Hungarian, to go to school and only learn [in] Hungarian, and they suppressed anything regarding the Slovak customs or language, but … my mother didn't speak too much about it. I don't think she had too much of an education until she came here, and the people in Summit provided her with at least the elementary English and reading. … They both ended up pretty smart, I mean, to start a business as they did and get through.

SH: Yes.

AV: What were your parents' initial reasons for coming to America?

HS: Poverty. [laughter]

SH: Perhaps your father was at the right age to be drafted.

HS: Yes. … I don't know why, [if that was his reason]. … See, that's one of the questions I never even thought about.

SH: It is hard to second-guess like that. Did you ever get together with your father's two sisters?

HS: Oh, yes. In fact, he also had a brother, I should say, in New York. No, Aunt Sophie had five children, but we would see her. In fact, when they were first married, I gather, they did see each other a great deal. My memory is, when I was around fifteen or so, they asked me to come into New York and spend a week with them, and, of course, as you know, things were very tight at home. … The thing I always remember about Aunt Sophie is, she took me to; … I used to know the name, not Macy's, not Bloomingdale's, not Barney's, well, whatever. …

SH: Ohrbach's?

HS: Might have been that, and [my aunt] bought me a lovely dress. … I never forgot that, but, … with my cousins, we established a very good rapport and, when I started driving, they didn't, of course. They lived on East 66th Street. So, I would drive in and spend a weekend with them, and then, they would come out during the summer. In fact, … you know, I have pictures, [which] I don't think would be [of] interest to you, but we would take them to the lakes, … and then, when they moved to Long Island and I drove out there, then, I'd take them to the shore and etc., etc. … To this day, we still communicate.

SH: Wonderful. What was the family name?

HS: My mother's … maiden name was Martinko, M-A-R-T-I-N-K-O, and, of course, my father's [was] Marko, M-A-R-K-O. No, "C-O" makes it Italian; that's what I tell her. [laughter]

SH: When your mother and father were together, did they speak English?

HS: No. In fact, … they only spoke Slovak in the house and, until I was about four, … I spoke only Slovak, until I realized people were not answering me when I talked. [laughter] In fact, we had a next-door neighbor that I used to visit, and, when they got tired of me, they'd say, "Dejik podack," which means, "It's going to rain," and I would dash, as fast as I could, home. I did not like rain. [laughter]

AV: Where did you learn to speak English, in school?

HS: Just around; well, [through] my brothers. … You know, I got to the point where I would not answer anybody unless they talked to me in English, and my mother used to get so mad. [laughter] … Not that she didn't speak fluent English, but she wanted me to retain it and I was stubborn. [laughter]

AV: Did your father know English?

HS: Oh, yes. Well, he ran a business, sure.

AV: I was going to say.

HS: Oh, yes; no, no, both of them. My father was a little accented, but my mother was not. She was very good, but, no, my father spoke English and, of course, with my two brothers [as well].

SH: You talked about the effects of the embargo against Japan on your family's business. Did the Depression affect the business as well?

HS: Well, see, … when I remember, the Depression was in '29. [Editor's Note: The Stock Market Crash of October 1929 is credited with initiating the Great Depression in the United States.] It really didn't hit us until about '33 or so, when the embargo started, and, of course, the frantic rush to try and convert to rayon or any other kind of material, and it was to no avail, of course. [Editor's Note: The demand for Japanese silk in the US dropped during the 1930s due to the effects of the Great Depression and, later, the development of synthetic replacements. Several political groups attempted to incite a popular embargo of Japanese goods over Japan's invasion of China and other acts of aggression. However, the US Federal Government did not become involved in halting the import of Japanese goods until mid-1941.] It just didn't work out, but it was many a rancorous night in the kitchen. [laughter]

SH: Really?

HS: Yes, because, you know, it was very horrendous to them. Oh, in fact, the only room in the house that was lit, was warm, was the kitchen. In fact, my mother would put six blankets on top of me and she'd heat the brick to put under my feet, but, no, … we weathered it. Of course, I didn't realize, I was fine, [laughter] but they weathered the storm.

AV: You said you went to Morristown High School.

HS: Right.

AV: Did you join any activities in high school?

HS: It was very hard. I worked after school … in the knitting mill. … A knitting mill owner rented our mill, and my mother went in as a cleaner. She would do [clean out] the imperfections in the product, … you know, clean them out, and I went in as a packer, after school. So, there was very little I could do. I was … head of the student finance board and I did go to one activity, which was the student musical in Morristown, but it was very difficult. See, some of the girls did have cars and I had none, and the people I went around with didn't have cars. So, it was not easy.

SH: What was the student finance board?

HS: Well, it handled all the activities of the students, the finances of the student organizations, and it was interesting.

SH: Does this mean that you were taking a business course?

HS: Oh, definitely, oh, yes. I knew better than to even try for college. [laughter] No, I took strictly secretarial and accounting [courses]. …

SH: What was your first memory of what was going on in Europe? You say you were very aware of the embargo against Japan.

HS: Well, I'll tell you, I knew what was going on, I guess, in the third person, because my brothers would discuss it and I'd hear it, but the emphasis was so on our own economic situation that that never took primary consideration or thought.

SH: Did you know of the circumstances facing your family in Europe?

HS: Well, the only thing that I do remember is, they would write asking for various pharmaceuticals, etc., and my mother would send packages to them, but, then, we found out they weren't getting them anyway, and so, she ceased doing that. … Even things like aspirin, I remember her going out to get aspirin. … This was after the war, primarily, when we got in touch with them, because, during the war, except for Frank getting into it, [their town in Czechoslovakia], … we had no real communication. … Then, as I said, Bill got married. … Oh, Frank was in the Army. He was discharged on December 6th, because he was overage. He was over twenty-eight. December 7th, we were all, … they were both, my two brothers, listening to the game when the announcement came over. [By the] first week in January, Frank was back in the Army.

SH: What were you doing on December 7th, when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

HS: Probably, I was in the house, helping my mother, I guess, making dinner, etc., the little I did. …

SH: You would have been about fifteen, if my math is right.

HS: Yes, right. How old was I? yes, '41, yes. … It's hard to even think about it, but I was interested in the game, too. So, I was in and out, and, primarily, I was home a lot. During the winter, we ice-skated on this pond behind a church, where we were [members], St. Vincent de Paul, you know, [where] I went [for] Catechism, [my] first Communion, etc., etc., Confirmation, but [in the] back of the church was this lake and in the center of the lake was an island. … The boys would come in, loaded with wood, and they'd start the bonfire in the center and we would skate around it and … that was the primary fun, because [there was] very little sledding or other things that we did. During the summer, [we] couldn't swim in there, [laughter] … but, you know, we played the usual games. On Sundays, we would ride our bikes around Stirling and Millington and Gillette. We'd go up to the shrine, St. Joseph's Shrine, on Sunday, a great deal. In fact, my one girlfriend and I, I didn't have a bike, so, I had to borrow a bike, but my girlfriend and I … rode our bikes from Stirling to Plainfield to visit my sister-in-law, who was living then with her mother, … who had the baby, and we rode back, but, I'll tell you, I never did that again. [laughter]

SH: That is a long ride.

HS: That was a ride, yes, about, what? thirteen miles, I think we went. …

AV: What were your parents' reactions to the attack on Pearl Harbor? Did your brothers have any fear of being drafted?

HS: Well, at first, you know, it seemed far away, Pearl Harbor seemed far away, and, as I said, let's see, it was '41. … I think my brother was already working for Art Color, [a magazine publishing facility], in Dunellen and my other brother was an insurance agent. … Of course, then, he went into the Army, came home. No, I think their … economic situation took precedence over everything.

SH: Had your older brother enlisted or had he been drafted?

HS: Oh, he had been; I'm sure he was drafted.

SH: He was older than most men who were drafted.

HS: Well, they were taking them then, I guess.

SH: This was before Pearl Harbor.

HS: Oh, yes.

SH: Did he go willingly?

HS: Oh, well, yes. … I mean, I don't think there was any doubt.

SH: Did he already have a wife and baby?

HS: No, no, my brother, Frank, was single. My brother, Bill, got married … the June following D-Day [in 1944], but Frank, no, was single, and he went in, went to OCS [Officer Candidate School]. We attended [the commissioning ceremony]. He became a second lieutenant, and then, first lieutenant and was overseas. In fact, we laugh at Bill. My brother, Bill, went in after the baby was born, and he went into his training, and then, he went into the dental service and was in Fitzsimons General Hospital [in Aurora, Colorado], and then, after the war, he went overseas. … We always laugh that he played baseball through Europe, because, you know, it was after the war. … He and Frank met for one [time]. When Bill was just arriving in France, he and Frank were able to get together for a short time. … Let's see, anything else?

SH: Frank was part of the early draft, prior to Pearl Harbor.

HS: Right, correct.

SH: When did he finish his service?

HS: December 6th, overage.

SH: He gets out, then, in January, he …

HS: … No, he got his orders. [laughter]

SH: He was recalled.

HS: Right.

SH: He was given a commission then.

HS: No, no, not at that time. He went in as a private. … He went on. I don't know if he became a sergeant. My brother Bill became a sergeant. Frank applied, I guess, for OCS and was accepted, and then, he received his bar at Fort Lee, Virginia.

SH: You all went down to Virginia.

HS: My mother and I and my girlfriend. My father didn't go. He wouldn't go. …

SH: Was there a reason he did not go?

HS: Well, my father was funny. … He'd rather go to work and come home, just that type. [laughter]

AV: What were your brother's feelings about coming home, then, having to go back to war?

HS: Really, I don't [know]. I don't recall that much, other than I'm sure he [did not complain]. Frank was a very disciplined guy. If he got his orders, … he would go. I mean, there was no haranguing or crying. My mother did that. [laughter]

SH: Your pre-interview survey says that Frank was drafted in 1941.

HS: Yes. That's Frank, yes.

SH: With whom did your brother serve in Europe?

HS: [Mrs. Salerno calls to her husband] Oh, Joe? … Could you come here, please? … Frank was in bomb disposal? Now, was this … when he became an officer?

SH: When he was in Europe?

JS: He was … a company commander of a Quartermaster unit, specializing in [the] moving of ammunition and that.

HS: Now, I knew he'd know that. [laughter] …

SH: You said your younger brother was trained in dentistry.

HS: Yes.

SH: You said he had played baseball overseas, after the war.

HS: Well, we were kidding him, yes.

SH: They did have teams, then.

HS: Oh, yes, they did. It was not a professional [team]. … That was just a local army unit teams, family joke.

JS: Yes. Usually, they had unit teams at that time.

HS: But, he was in the dental service. … He was, you know, an assistant, and he attained … his sergeant's stripes, and they both came home in '45. …

AV: Did your brothers ever share any of their experiences with you when they came home?

HS: Not too much. … I think Frank spoke more to Joe than anybody. Joe, did Frank ever talk to you about his experiences? not that I know of.

JS: You know, he was part of the service of supply, I was in the infantry. …

HS: Yes, there was nothing really compatible.

JS: They used to grab the shoes before we could get them. [laughter]

HS: That's what he complained [of when] he became a POW [prisoner of war]. [laughter]

SH: What other war related activities were you involved in as a young teenager?

HS: Well, this young teenager didn't have too much, when you're in Stirling. In fact, my life was pretty full, in that I worked after school. On Saturday, my mother and I cleaned the mill, you know, because of all that lint and mess under the knitting machines, etc. So, we would clean that and our big treat was to take the bus to Plainfield. We'd do our shopping, and then, we'd have an ice cream sundae. That was our treat, and, also, my mother had an acquaintance … who lived right adjacent to the grammar school in Stirling, and she was widowed. … She and her husband, before he died… every Christmas, set out an elaborate crib scene, and all the children were allowed to come from school to view it. Well, anyway, when he was deceased, she had no one. So, my mother and I would buy what she requested, and then, I would amble up to … her home and give it to her, and, as a result, I would get a volume of Shakespeare. That was my "thank you." … The only thing is, [for] the poor woman, Mom would throw in, you know, fruit or something, because she felt that she didn't have enough, [laughter] and she complained like mad about the amount of money that my mother spent and it was nothing. [laughter] She had no realization, you know.

SH: She was not going out to see what the prices were.

HS: No, she was homebound.

SH: How did the rationing affect you?

HS: Well, we, of course, had our ration books, and I guess I'm not telling tales out of school, after all these years, but we had a butcher in Plainfield. See, we did our groceries at the Lucky Spot and they had a butcher adjacent. Well, he had a farm and, … when he would, you know, kill the animals, he would bring it in and we would be fortunate enough to get, … you know, some item of meat for which we did not have to give that ration book. … My mother was very careful and [we] survived. … I never felt I had to worry about it, so, I guess it couldn't be too bad. The only thing I knew is that … the money situation was tight, when I was in junior high, particularly. … My mother went and cleaned house for this woman. So, she would remodel her daughter's dresses to fit me, and that's how I got some of my clothes. … You know, at that time, I didn't think [about our financial situation]. "So? This is what happened," you know, and, of course, … one of our first graduates was killed-in-action about a month after he was sent overseas, a boy from Stirling, and that was … the first casualty of Stirling. …

SH: Was there a service for him?

HS: Not that [I know of]. Oh, I imagine there was a church service there, but I don't know if he came home, [to] tell you the truth. I think he was buried over there.

SH: I was wondering how the community reacted.

HS: See, [my] memory is very bad.

SH: Did you notice Gold Stars?

HS: Oh, yes, yes, … they were there. They had it in the window. … You know, we had our blue stars. … [Editor's Note: American families hung Service Flags, red-bordered white rectangles with blue stars in the center representing each service member in the family, in their windows during the war. A gold star indicated an individual had died in the service.]

SH: Did you have a garden?

HS: Not really, no. Now, I wouldn't do it. My father was working in the asbestos [mill]. My father was a very unusual man. They would give them a work line at which they had to achieve this quota, but, if you worked over the quota, you got extra money. They used to get so mad at my father, because he would go over the quota. Then, they'd raise the quota, and, of course, that did not sit right with the others. In a way, I can't blame them, [laughter] but, you know, money was tight and that was his way of bringing more home.

SH: You talked about how difficult it was around the kitchen table as your family discussed finances.

HS: The frustrations.

SH: What was it like having the mill rented out to someone else?

HS: Well, that was later. The mill remained vacant for quite some time.

SH: Did it?

HS: And that was, you know, the problem. Now, it must be before my brothers went in the Army, because … all the frustration was expressed then. They'd send me to bed. [laughter] …

SH: Your brothers were considered equals in these discussions.

HS: Oh, yes, yes. I don't think my father had any choice.

SH: They were also running a shift, you said.

HS: Oh, yes, they were running [it]. … Let's see, Frank was older and Bill was only four years younger, so, as I told you, they each had a shift. … Bill was the athlete. He played baseball and football. So, what happened [was], if he had a game, Frank would take over for him. … Frank had an emergency appendectomy when he was fifteen and, at that time, he almost died on the table, from what Mom told me. So, as a result, he couldn't participate as he would have liked. So, Bill continued.

JS: What about your father's "Old World" thinking, when you got out of grammar school?

HS: Oh, I told them about … Bill and Frank. … Bill only had one year of high school and Frank had none, and … how Bill and Frank came to my rescue, so-to-speak. [laughter]

AV: What were your father's feelings about you entering the workforce right after graduation?

HS: Oh, he was happy.

AV: Really?

HS: Oh, yes. … In fact, let's see, I went in in '44 and I got my first paycheck. … See, prior to that, I did babysitting and anything I made went to Mom. So, when I got my first paycheck, I ran and had it cashed and came home to give it to my mother, and my brother yelled at me, because he said, "You shouldn't let everybody know how much you make." [laughter] …

SH: They were always giving you advice.

HS: Oh, yes. Oh, Frank was the one who gave me the most advice. Bill was too busy with his girlfriends.

AV: What was your job like?

HS: Oh, it was very nice, actually. I took dictation. … As I said, we had admissions, at the rate of at least fifty, one bus or two buses, a day. So, we were all involved in getting the forms ready for the ward. …

JS: Did you tell them how these guys were breaking down at Fort Dix, … you know, just as they were inducted, and then, they'd take them right up to Lyons, and then, we'd process them in?

HS: Yes, because they never made it, even through the ninety-day …

AV: Training?

SH: These were not people coming back from the war.

HS: Oh, no, no. These were just …

JS: Well, you had them, too.

HS: Yes, we got them, but that was at a later date, because they were still going into Army and Navy facilities.

SH: You went immediately after graduation in 1944.

HS: Exactly. I graduated June 14th or so, and I was working in two weeks.

SH: Some vacation. [laughter]

HS: Oh, I was anxious.

SH: This would have been just after D-Day. Do you remember any of the headlines?

HS: Well, this was June of '44. D-Day was …

JS: June 6th.

HS: … 6th, and, well, we were all following it, you know. That, we all got interested in and, you know, as I got older, I … had more interest in it, and my parents, of course, were following it, because of … their two sons.

JS: And psychiatric medicine was so different then.

HS: Oh, I haven't even gone [into that]. Well, I did tell them how …

JS: … You know, these were people that broke down right at Dix, or at Camp Kilmer, because Camp Kilmer was the jumping off point. …

HS: As they were being processed, even, they did.

JS: So, they would end up at Lyons and, really, the psychiatric treatment at Lyons didn't change until the tranquilizers came in.

HS: Right. It was very closed. The walls were all either dingy yellow or dingy green. [laughter] That's all.

JS: It was very depressing.

HS: Very, very depressing.

SH: Had this been built as a facility after World War I?

JS: 1932.

HS: 1930. "1930," it says in there, November.

JS: I'm not going to argue with her. …

HS: No, it's in the booklet. [laughter]

AV: Yes, it says 1930.

HS: Yes, see, you wrote it. …

JS: But, I'm surprised.

HS: November, yes, of 1930.

JS: Oh, wait, that's right. Roosevelt got elected in '32, and, then, [in 1930], Hoover was President.

HS: Right. … No, … as far as I was concerned, it wasn't depressing, because … [laughter] the only thing that was depressing were the three older women who … had been in … as secretaries for years. … Coming in, at eighteen and nineteen, we wanted the windows open, they wanted them shut, [laughter] you know, things like that, and they couldn't stand, "Oh, you're so loud," you know. … Of course, at Kilmer, we had a lot of prisoners, particularly Italian prisoners, and there would be a group of girls from the hospital who would travel [to Kilmer], on Saturday evenings, and dance with these Italian POWs. In fact, one of them fell in love and went back to Italy after the war and they got married, and she brought him home and he worked at Lyons, also.

JS: He was a mason.

HS: Mason.

JS: You know, a skilled mason. … That's a gone, you know, artisan now, you know. …

SH: That is a great story. Did you ever go to any of the USO [United Service Organizations] dances?

HS: No, I didn't, but the only thing we used to do [was], which we enjoyed; let's see, I was twenty-one when I got a car. …

SH: Did you buy your own car?

HS: My parents bought my car. [laughter] Oh, I was the only …

JS: When you had a car, was it after the war?

HS: Well, yes, when I got my Pontiac. …

SH: It would have been two years after the war, in 1947.

HS: … Until we left Stirling, I was traveling by train to Lyons.

JS: Yes, that's what I'm saying, because you only got four gallons of gas.

HS: Yes, no, no. … The only time [we got more was] … when they [the brothers] came home, they used the ration for what [they needed], you know, but, no, I remember, I didn't get my license until I was, what? twenty, twenty-one. My brother Frank taught me, and he let me use his car. I don't know how he did that, but he did, [laughter] and I learned to drive on that, and then, if I had to go somewhere, [I would drive]. … After he left the Army, he went into business in Paterson. You'd think he would have learned. [laughter] Anyway, he went back with the silk manufacturing and he had quite a good business going. So, if I needed the car, I would drive him to Paterson, and then, drive home, and then, I'd pick him up later. I think he'd stay there several days, … but he eventually sold the business and came back. … What did Frank do after? I can't even remember.

JS: [Frank] went to work, like anybody else. He was working at …

HS: Well, he went to work, but I don't know.

JS: At that fan place in Plainfield, I remember.

HS: Okay. Well, anyway, he went to work.

SH: Did he marry?

HS: He didn't marry until he was in his forties. … Our next-door neighbor was the director of music at North Plainfield High School and he brought this woman in, Rosie, and I don't know whether she was the, you know, maid or what. … She lost her husband on the Russian Front, she was German, and she brought … her son with her, because she had a sister here in North Plainfield. … They eventually got together and married, and they went to live in Cranford. Let's see, when Bill was still home with us, his wife and he lived with us for a short time, until they found an apartment. He brought home a German shepherd, Toby, who was just a beautiful, beautiful animal. … The whole family fell in love with him. … I'll tell you, my brother Frank walked with him. Frank had to go to the drug store for something and he took Toby with him, so, he treated Toby to a little ice cream. … It got so Toby went there every afternoon and Frank would pay the bill every week. [laughter] That was only during the summertime that it happened, but that was one aspect of Toby.

SH: He kept the date, whether or not there was anybody there.

HS: Oh, yes. Oh, the druggist was very nice. He'd get the ice cream, put a plate down and let him have his ice cream, and then, bill Frank.

SH: That is a great story. As an eighteen year-old at Lyons, how did your father's "Old World" views on women and education affect your experiences?

HS: … I was a pretty good girl. I didn't date that much.

JS: Maybe I should leave the room. [laughter] …

HS: There's nothing to say. … I dated very infrequently. Some of the boys, you know, you knew everybody in town, so, I'd go out occasionally, but nothing that would cause [them to worry]. Only once, I caused my parents agita. We went on a hayride, a whole group of us from Lyons, and fellows and girls, and one of the girls lost her keys in the hay. Well, the boy I was with decided, "Well, we'll take them home." Well, we had to go by way of "Jabib" to get everybody home. So, it was three o'clock before I got home. My mother didn't say anything, but my brother Bill read the riot act, [laughter] because I told Mom what had happened and she accepted it, but not Bill, no. [laughter]

SH: I thought your parents were going to be strict, but I should have known your brothers would be very strict.

AV: Were your brothers protective over you?

HS: Yes. Oh, Frank was, particularly. You know, you asked what we used to do for any type of entertainment. A group of us girls, after we got our [licenses], you know, were driving, etc., would go, a great deal of [the] time, to the Paper Mill Playhouse. … We'd have dinner out and go to the Paper Mill and come home and that was one of our social activities.

SH: Was the Paper Mill still running shows during the war?

HS: This is after the war, after the war. During the war, very little there [that] we had, you know, except for the bus that took us to Plainfield, and we'd go to an occasional movie, but the schedule was very, very erratic and you just didn't do that. So, occasionally, now, for instance, the church would put on a Christmas pageant. We'd all be in it, you know, that, the crèche [with] the baby Jesus at birth, and we'd have a chorus, … a lot of homemade things. They'd bring in a movie and show it at the local hall, and very, very quiet, really.

SH: Were you working with many women at Lyons, since most able-bodied men were at war?

HS: Well, we did have the aides, were the men. … I guess they were mostly, maybe, 4-F, I don't know. Maybe they just had a condition that prevented their being put into the service, but … that was their, I guess, alternative service, because they would travel in from Pennsy [Pennsylvania] and everywhere.

SH: Were there any enlisted personnel, other than the doctors, working there?

HS: No. … The doctors were the officers and I don't recall any other military designations.

SH: Were the nurses all Army nurses?

HS: No, they weren't Army. No, no, they were local, you know, usual. They, apparently, you know, had worked there for quite awhile. Then, we had the influx of the student nurses during the war. Then, … they would come in and we had them, preparing for their nursing career. … Later on, we had a residency program where … we had the residents studying psychiatry, because, at the time, Lyons was strictly a psychiatric institution. They had a small surgical service, small, you know, various other services, but, really, it was more like a domiciliary before the war. … Now, during the war, then, we got Quonset huts; that's where the student nurses were. They built Quonset huts where they'd have religious services. That's where they would be held. They started building. They built an addition of … four buildings added to it. … There were two circles and they completed the circle. … That was all psychiatry, until the; … Joe, what's the word? tranquilizers, the tranquilizers came in and were able to calm [them], give a calming influence to the patients. They were doing lobotomies, but for a very short time, because they proved not to be as effective as [tranquilizers], you know, or good for the veteran.

SH: Were there any long-term veterans under care, that you were aware of?

HS: Well, I always think of Mr. (Morrison?).

JS: Well, actually, when she [worked there later], they were all long-term. …

HS: Yes, but …

SH: When she went in as a young woman.

HS: We were not in contact with any veteran, none at all.

SH: You had no idea.

HS: No, we were not allowed, because there was no kind of intercommunication. Later on, with the advent of these new medications, then, the girls were transferred on to the wards. Then, they became secretarial and filing on each ward and the whole place opened up then.

JS: See, they did all the processing in a pool, you know, the administrative processing, because, in those days, the patients were really difficult, hard to handle. Back when I came in, and this is after the Korean War, it was still that way. … I worked in a clinic to begin with, and, you know, one of the patients had me pinned. If it wasn't for my partner, I might have been, really, in bad shape, but, as the tranquilizers took hold, that all changed. Then, they became zombies, worse yet, you know. They over medicated and, you know, you felt like you were in a community of zombies, because they were letting them out in the grounds.

SH: Had the doctors that you were taking dictation from served anywhere else, other than Lyons?

HS: Other VA [Veterans Affairs] installations, … I'm just reading, and, no, they were not in any Army [field units]. …

JS: Well, the residents that came in …

HS: Oh, the residents, that's different.

JS: They were ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] or V-12.

HS: V-12, but … I thought you were talking about … the permanent physicians. No, we had the ASTP/V-12 come in and, as I say, the student nurses. In fact, during the war and before, well, right at the beginning, the hospital was self-serving. … In fact, they had their own garden [and] they had a piggery. The big male [pig] was named after the director of the hospital, you know, things like that, and, every year, we'd all go out and look at the little piglets. [laughter] … They had their cows, they had, actually, an agricultural setting, and they ate their own food. … They were self-sufficient in that sense. Later on, of course, all that disappeared with modernization. … One thing, they had an awful lot of land and they built a golf course on the land. … That was eighteen holes, wasn't it, [or] nine holes? …

JS: That was donated by the PGA [Professional Golf Association].

HS: Yes, PGA donated [it], but there were lots of land and, during the fall, when hunting season [arrived], all the deer would congregate in this one area, and, as we're walking up, we would see them. They paid no attention to us, [laughter] but that all disappeared.

JS: Tell them why … the deer congregated there.

HS: Well, because of hunting season.

JS: Yes, they were safe there.

HS: They were safe, yes. [laughter] That's right. They couldn't hunt on federal land. You know, I always think people know this. …

JS: See, what she's not saying, and, you know, to give her credit that she doesn't [say it], at that time, when she started at Lyons, you know, with her background, with stenography and secretarial, they could have gobbled up high-paying jobs, and that's what I give her credit for. It might have been geographic help, but, by staying at Lyons, at that low rate of pay, during the war, when you could make, you know, money hand over fist, she was serving a purpose, because [of] the load of patients coming in at that time, you know. … I got this by communication with former directors and all when I got there, and I had a relative that ended up there. … That, to me, these girls that were willing to stay there, under really stressful type conditions …

HS: Oh, and we earned a grand amount of 1,752 dollars a year. [laughter]

JS: What I'm saying is, that, to me, is where I feel their big war effort was, in [being] willing to stay there in that type of an environment, when they could have really gone out and made big money, [even] just going to Newark. All she had to do was take the train to Newark.

SH: Did you ever think of becoming a student nurse?

HS: It wasn't a question of interest; it was a question of finance. There was no way I could …

SH: Some of these programs were financed by the government, were they not?

HS: Oh, yes. Well, at that point in time, I had gone beyond that.

SH: You were making big bucks.

HS: [laughter] Oh, terrific. We worked six days a week.

JS: And she really could stand blood.

HS: What?

JS: And you really could stand the sight of blood.

HS: Oh, never. [laughter]

JS: Even now. [laughter]

HS: No, I never had the slightest idea.

SH: Nursing was of no interest to you. Because you were doing this, you said busloads of people were coming, two a day …

HS: Right.

SH: Did you find that the people who were caring for those who were arriving, or processing and signing them in, acted as if this was just a business or did they seem to really care for the patients?

HS: No, I don't think so. … I'm sure a lot of them … [felt] this was their alternate service, but I never felt there was any kind of misuse or abuse of a patient. The little I saw, and the way they talked, you know, [as though] they knew them, … no, I felt they did the best they could with … what they had available.

JS: They more abused the staff. [laughter]

HS: Yes, they were abusive to the staff.

SH: Were they?

HS: Oh, yes. They'd try and beat them up, oh, yes.

JS: No, they were tough.

SH: Were the doctors on some sort of rotation or were they permanently there?

HS: Oh, no, the doctors, they were permanently there. They were officers in the Army and they were there. In fact, they were there most of [the time], you know, during the war, definitely. In fact, this one doctor stayed there, Dr. Roecker. … Then, he went into private practice and I went to work part-time for him, because he set up his office and, … once a month, I'd go to his office, do all the billing and he would put all his correspondence on tape. I'd take it home or I'd do it, transcribe it, right there, and then, come home. …

SH: You talked about the great volume of people that were coming in, even when you were just starting there in 1944. Did you notice a change in the numbers as the war progressed?

HS: Well, yes, very much so. They had received medical care before they arrived. It was only when they were deemed unable to return to private life and determined to be dangerous to themselves or in need of added neurological or psychiatric care that we received them. …

JS: [What] they needed, really, it was confinement to a mental hospital.

HS: Yes. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Please, Amanda, restate your question.

AV: Did working at Lyons, in the psychiatric ward, seeing these distraught soldiers, while having brothers serving overseas, affect you in any way, emotionally?

HS: Yes, it did, but, you know, everybody else was in the same situation, and so, therefore, everyone was in the same somber mood, you know. … At holidays and birthdays, it was very, very difficult, particularly for my parents at that time. Just the idea that, [for] Christmas and their birthdays, they aren't here, … it was traumatic in that sense and, with me, I don't like to hear *I'll Be Home For Christmas*, because I cry at that one, at that song, and only because of my brothers at the time, and what was the other song? …There was a song that they played on the ship coming home, he [her brother] said, and he said that was the song for him, but I've forgotten now which one. If I heard it, I'd know.

AV: You did not enjoy hearing the song because your brothers were not home for Christmas.

HS: Well, when he was coming home, aboard ship, they were constantly playing this one song, but, for me, it was *I'll Be Home For Christmas*. …

JS: What are you talking about now, your brothers? You talking about your brothers?

HS: Yes, … because Joe has, … there were four brothers, three of them in the service, so, his mother went through a lot, and, of course, he was a POW. That made it horrendous for her.

AV: Did you have any interaction with the patients?

HS: We were not allowed, at that time, that period of time, and then, of course, when they opened up the wards and all, I was already the secretary to the assistant director [of] professional services. So, I essentially stayed right where I was.

AV: Was the office where you worked in a different part of the building?

HS: No, the room that we were in, as a common pool area, was broken up into individual offices, and, of course, I was outside my boss' office. … One girl, this secretary to the director, … or the chief of professional services, was in one side. Her boss was in a big office. My boss only had a slightly smaller office and we were around the corner from each other and we would spell each other. … Well, I'll tell you this, until I came back to work for the third time, in 1986, when I was there, I stayed on the ward for six months, only to gain my retirement, you know, have enough years, time in, to get my [retirement], that was the only time I spent on the ward and it happened to be the ward with Alzheimer patients; oh, boy, anyway, it was, they were all very, very sick patients. … The nicest thing, or the tragic thing, I guess, I don't know how you would say it, were these wives coming in, staying with them, feeding them, because the nurses couldn't do it all. … They would stay with their husbands and made sure they were taken care of and they'd go home in late afternoon. … They were very devout, very devoted to their husbands.

SH: Being that it was hard for you to see all these GIs being admitted to the hospital during the war, did you have any interaction with their families?

HS: None at all.

SH: Did their families ever come to visit?

HS: Oh, that happened after it was all opened up, and they would come in to see … my doctor or the … chief of professional services. In fact, one thing, I had a Dr. Sobin [who] was … my boss and he was an elderly man and as loving as you could be. … I called him "Uncle Julius," and I never did that when people were around, but it slipped one day and [a visitor] said, "No wonder she's got a job, she's working for her uncle." [laughter] … Anyway, so that, as far as [patient families], that's the only interaction, just, … you know, acknowledging them, making an appointment, but, other than that, very little.

SH: At Lyons, were you part of what would be considered the Civil Service?

HS: Absolutely. Joe, what was Nine Building when I worked there?

JS: A neurology building?

HS: No.

JS: … Oh, Alzheimer's.

HS: Alzheimer's, that's the word. It was all Alzheimer's; that's why I say the wives were so devoted.

SH: Were there women who were supervisors of the pool when you were first there?

HS: Well, we had Miss Fox, who was the actual supervisor. … We drove her crazy, and then, there were two other older women who were there. … I can still picture them. They sat in a corner over there, but that was the only [older women], as far as elderly, as far as we were involved, and, as I said, we drove them [crazy]. You know, really, we weren't very nice to them.

AV: You mentioned that you were required to take a test at your high school before receiving this job, correct?

HS: That's right, a federal entrance test.

AV: Did any of your classmates from high school go to work at Lyons with you?

HS: They took it, but … I think I was the only one that went; wait a minute, am I the only one? Yes, I'm the only one who went there.

AV: There were other girls your age that worked with you.

HS: … My age? Oh, yes. …

AV: Where were the other girls your age from?

HS: Well, … most of them, the girls I was immediate friends [with], they were there a year prior to me. Now, whether they took the test there or at the hospital, I don't know, but they were all from nearby communities, because of the difficulty of getting to the hospital. So, this one girl, she just lived in Liberty Corner, which is just a hop, skip and a jump, and so that, as I say, I think I was the only one who went to Lyons. Another girlfriend of mine eventually came from Morristown, came in to work, and she became secretary to the chief of the chaplaincy service, … and there were other girls who drifted in and out, you know.

SH: What was the dress code during World War II?

HS: Well, … you know, we were trying to be as business-like [as possible]. … We wore heels and suits and any old dresses, etc. …

AV: Hats and gloves?

HS: No, not that excessive now, no. … Rural Stirling wasn't that dressy. [laughter]

SH: Did you ever look into the possibility of switching jobs?

HS: Well, what happened was, … the doctors that I worked with, one … transferred out to Illinois and he called me and wanted me to come out to Illinois to … take over his office. Another one wanted me to become a medical records librarian and he was pushing that, but I decided no. … While I would have made a great deal more money, I was just too lazy, I guess, then. [laughter] …

SH: You were still living at home.

HS: Oh, yes, I lived at home until I married. In fact, … we made an apartment on the third floor and we stayed there … until we bought our house. …

SH: Were you still working six days a week?

HS: Oh, yes, that was during wartime.

SH: That was a nine in the morning to five in the evening workday.

HS: You know, eight-thirty to four, you know, it varied. They changed the times every so often. So, I think we were working eight to four-thirty at the last.

SH: What about the blackouts? Did you have any air raid drills or anything of that sort?

HS: Not that I recall, none at all. We were very rural. [laughter]

SH: Did you take part in any of the war bond drives or anything like that?

HS: Well, we all subscribed and took out war bonds, oh, yes. Even in school, we had the war stamps, you know, with the booklets that we took. You know, that, we tried to do. In fact, I guess, my car, I don't know if I paid with some of my bonds … for my first car. I know Mom gave me most of the money, but I had my money, too.

SH: You spoke about your friends who went down to Camp Kilmer to dance at the USO. Were you ever a part of things like that?

HS: No. It was difficult. First of all, I lived in Stirling. I'd have no way of getting to Kilmer and they wouldn't take me home, whereas some of the other girls … had transportation.

AV: How did you normally get to and from work?

HS: Train and walk.

SH: You spoke about how interns and the student nurses started coming into the hospital. Were there any group activities for the young hospital staff?

HS: Oh, I guess, in the hospital, they did, yes. No, they were a young group. …

JS: Well, social programs for the personnel.

HS: Yes, but it was all in the hospital. … What I was going to say is that when Joe was chief of recreation service and they would have the various programs, like carnivals and things like that, that he was in charge of, … I'd take the children and we'd have that, but that's about the only kind of [activity] in hospital. [laughter]

JS: You didn't live up there. Now, see, we had a lot of employees. Especially, getting aides was difficult. They'd go to Pennsylvania and recruit … and this was, say, after World War II and particularly during the Korean War. I wasn't there, but these are, again, things I learned, and so, they had quarters for them.

HS: Oh, yes, I said the Quonset huts and all.

JS: Well, there was that building, you know.

HS: Yes, Building Five.

JS: And they would, you know, set up their own social programs there.

SH: What was the most interesting thing that you did?

HS: In what manner? [laughter]

SH: During the war, in your work, what interested you the most?

HS: Well, actually, to tell you the truth, … I really had very little other than doing my work [and] going home, … until I got older. I was pretty much a homebody and anything I did was with the girls in Stirling and, really, I didn't participate in any bond drives or anything of that sort.

JS: I think she's talking about your work, I think, is what she's [saying].

HS: No, no, I think she was talking about any kind of interest, right?

SH: The general is fine, but I really was referring to your work at Lyons during the war. Being a very young girl who left home, so-to-speak, for the first time, what was the most interesting aspect for you at that time?

JS: … You would tell me about how the doctors would transcribe very, you know, sexual …

HS: Oh, I had even forgot about Dr. (Michaels?), yes.

JS: You know, very cogent, sexual matters, and she's a kid. She'd be embarrassed out of the [room].

HS: Oh, yes, they decided they were going to cure me. [laughter]

JS: No, they'd … [laughter]

HS: Is that what you're referring to? Well, the doctors are going to cure me, because, every time they dictated explicit sexual items, … you know, the hand would tremble, … the face would flush and I would turn away and all. [They would say], "Helen, we can't go on like this." [laughter] So, Dr. (Michaels?) and Doctor Kaplan would go out of their way to explicitly, to the minute detail, [explain] every little aspect of a sexual connotation. Eventually, I got hardened. [laughter]

AV: You mentioned earlier that there was strict patient-doctor confidentiality. Did it ever become an issue while transcribing and writing patients' names down?

HS: Yes, but, you know, they had so many, you couldn't [remember anything specific]. …

AV: You never knew any of the patients.

HS: No, there was nobody local that ever came in. Joe had someone local, but that was way after. I did have something, though. … This is in the way of another [story]; you know, you'd think we never did any work, the way I'm talking. [laughter] … When Miss Fox went on vacation …

AV: Who was Miss Fox?

HS: Miss Fox was our boss, an elderly woman. Well, anyway, we had young doctors. So, they'd want to take a break. So, they'd come in and they'd talk [with the administrative staff]. Well, my work wasn't getting done, [started] piling up, because it was quite a group of us. It wasn't just me, you know, it was all of [us]. She comes back, I think I had files this high. She almost; I don't know, the poor thing almost fainted, but … what we did is, we just broke it down and we got it done, because it was really minute. It wasn't anything very important. The important stuff got out. …

SH: Miss Fox would actually order around the young doctors.

HS: "Out," oh, yes, after they were [done], "if you're through dictating." [laughter] No, she was a doll, she really was. She put up with an awful lot, but, then, as I say, I became secretary to the assistant chief of professional services, Viola became secretary to the chief of professional services and they broke up [the pool]. The other girl became … secretary to the chief of research. … Then, we had, let's see, it was a lot of offices, and there was a conference room in the back and two or three offices on each side, and then, a space in the center. … After that, I stayed in that position; let's see, I'm not sure how long I was [there]. Then, I became secretary to the assistant director and at that time is when I met Joe.

SH: How did you two meet?

HS: Well, first of all, Joe had a brother who was working at the hospital. He was a chief guard, and his comment to every single girl who came into the installation was, "If you could only cook, I'd introduce you to … my kid brother." I said, "Who wants to meet your kid brother?" [laughter] I said, "I can't cook." So, Pat [his brother] would, you know, … tease me about that. So, finally, Joe arrives and I'm walking down the hall …

SH: Did he go to work there?

HS: Yes, he came to work in; he came into recreation, into [December 1956]…

JS: See, I came out of the VA at East Orange, for a promotion.

HS: Yes, and he was talking to a couple of the dieticians down the hall, right? and then, I started walking down the hall and they said, "Hey, Joe, here's somebody who really hates you," and that's how I met Joe, [laughter] and I thought he was kind of cute, though. [laughter]

JS: And I liked her legs. [laughter]

SH: Why did they say, "Here's somebody who hates you?"

HS: Well, because … his brother'd always say, "If you could only cook, I'd introduce you to my kid brother," and that was the kid brother, but the girls decided they wanted me to get married, so, I would get the application forms of any single, white, male applicant. Well, at this point in time, they were only two. I chose the right one. [laughter]

AV: Did he ask you on a date?

HS: Yes. Well, it was a matter of my car wouldn't start. So, I'd call him, "Please, fix my car," you know, little things, and then, he says I did this, every time he had to come to personnel, all of a sudden, he had a lot of papers to sign, individually, each day, and he'd come by my office and I'd say, "Come on in."

JS: I thought she set it up, because I could've signed them all at one time.

HS: Oh, I'm presuming it was deliberate, in a way, because the girls have [control there]. …

JS: See, I would come in at noon. In recreation, … you know, we did most of our work in the evening. She'd say, "Come on in." I said, "I don't want to get in trouble with the assistant [director]." "He doesn't mind." [laughter]

HS: So, he didn't.

JS: And, you know, there is something to fate, though, because, … you know, we had a date, nothing to [get excited over?], you know, and then, I think we had a couple of dates. …

HS: Well, we went to that one retirement dinner.

JS: Went to (Fox's?) retirement, and, one night, I'm coming home from work and I have to go through North Plainfield, stopped at a red light and she's coming the other way. You know, it's summertime and we had our windows open, [or] I did. She said, "You want to come over for a cup of coffee?" I said, "Fine." I go over and she didn't know how to make coffee. [laughter]

HS: Instant. [laughter]

JS: It was one of them instant things. So, I said, "Oh, for Christ's sakes, this isn't coffee." So, the next morning, I went out and bought a little coffeepot, two-cup pot. [laughter]

HS: My mother didn't know what to make of him.

JS: I brought it in for her, with coffee, and I said, "The next time you invite me over for coffee, give me a cup of coffee." [laughter] So, she invited me, and then, I was stopping [in] every night.

HS: But, we had moved from Stirling. I omitted that part. … Once my brothers were gone and everything, Mom and Pop sold the mill, sold the house, and we moved to North Plainfield. We moved in with my sister-in-law and brother, who also lived in North Plainfield, until we bought our house on …

JS: Fairview Avenue.

HS: Yes, Fairview Avenue.

SH: Okay. I thought you were in the third floor of the house at the mill.

HS: No, no. That's why; I omitted that part. No, my parents bought a two-family house and, of course, there was a third floor, but, so, that's when … I had the car, traveling to Lyons, and that's how we passed each other.

JS: Well, you ought to explain that third floor. See, … wealthy people had their home, originally.

HS: Yes.

JS: And that was where the maid lived. So, it had a bathroom and it had, you know, stairs going up to it, like a little vestibule, a living room and a bedroom. So, we converted one little part of it into a kitchen and we painted it, you know. While we were in our so-called "courting period," we painted and furnished the apartment.

HS: Well, you see, we met in December, we married in June. So, there weren't too many months involved. [laughter]

JS: I told her I couldn't get married, and she says, "Why can't you get married?" I said, "I've got to pay off my car," and she says, "When are you [done] paying?" I said, "I'll be done in June." "We can get married in the middle of June," she says. [laughter]

HS: That wasn't me. [laughter] …

JS: Although she wanted to get married in February, that's right, and I said, "Oh, February," [laughter] I said, "man, I can't get married in February. I've got a car to pay off." [laughter]

SH: What year was this?

HS: … Well, December of '56, and June of '57 that we got married. …

AV: You said that your brothers were very protective over you. What was their initial reaction to you getting married?

HS: Oh, they were; … well, by that time, they couldn't care less. [laughter]

JS: By then, they were married, [too]. …

HS: My mother wasn't happy.

SH: Really?

HS: No.

AV: Why not?

HS: Well, Mama wanted me to stay single and take care of Mama and Papa, I think.

JS: The old-timers had that concept; the youngest was to stay with you.

HS: Well, my cousin, Aunt (Sophie's?) daughter, did just that. … All her [sisters], the other girls, married, she stayed home, and she now is taking care of her onewidowed sister and another widowed sister, whose husband just died. … Now, they're living in one home up in Orangeburg, New York.

SH: Did you stay involved with the church as a young woman?

HS: Yes. When I was young, oh, Sister (Agnes Claire?) wouldn't let you do otherwise. No, I belonged to [the church]. … Growing up, I was very involved with the summer school, Catechism, you know, going through first Communion and Confirmation. I belonged to the Young Ladies' Sodality, the choir. My brother Frank belonged to the choir, and my brother Bill was an usher. We were involved in any of the carnivals they gave. …

JS: Weren't you secretary of the committee that bought a Cadillac for the priest?

HS: Oh, that was in North Plainfield, not in Stirling. This, I was talking about Stirling. … I thought she meant [when I was] young.

SH: I did, yes.

HS: … When we moved to North Plainfield, my sister-in-law decided I should do something for the church and she put my name in to be the secretary to this group of people who were celebrating Father's, I don't know which anniversary. … They wanted to give him a Cadillac for … the present from … the community, and so, that meant my writing all the invitation letters, and I'd get a call from Father, about nine o'clock at night, [saying], "I got another name for you," [and I would answer], "Okay, Father," [laughter] and so, that was my involvement and, of course, right on to the presentation. Unfortunately, he didn't get the exact … amount of money for the Cadillac, but he donated the remainder himself to get it. I never saw it. … [laughter]

JS: Father (Campbell?). He was funny, because, when … she's late coming to her own wedding …

HS: I wasn't late. I was in a vestibule, waiting for them to put …

JS: And Father (Campbell?) tells me, up at the altar, "Don't worry, if she don't show up in five minutes," he says, "I've got a girl in reserve in the backyard." [laughter] …

SH: Where did you marry?

HS: St. Joseph's Church [in] North Plainfield, a block from where we lived. So, yes, it was a happy time, really was, you know. …

SH: Why did he think you were late?

HS: Well, see, what happened [was], … all his friends came from Newark and they were engrossed in what they were doing, whatever it was, and they neglected to bring down the white sheeting or carpeting, whatever, that runs down the aisle.

SH: The aisle runner.

HS: So, in the meantime, we had arrived and we're all standing in the vestibule, waiting for it. So, finally, someone went up and they hurriedly did it, … and then, we progressed to the Mass and the wedding, … but he always tells me I was late. [laughter]

JS: Well, the priest told me you were late.

HS: Yes, well, the priest, Father, wouldn't have known I was back there. The door was closed, until they opened it.

SH: Did you continue to work at Lyons together after you were married?

HS: We did until our daughter, Ellen, was born. I think I finally left in January of '59.

JS: Well, you went on maternity leave beforehand.

HS: Well, I officially resigned, [then].

JS: … Oh, yes, that's right. You were just using leave when Ellen was born.

HS: Yes, see, I had accumulated sick leave. So, I used that, and then, officially resigned. … Then, we had Joseph three years later and I, more or less, stayed home. The only thing I did do was travel to Summit, once a month, and do the billing, etc., and come home. … Otherwise, I was home. Then, when the children got to be of school age, Joseph particularly, I went to work as a volunteer at the grammar school and it progressed to being a part-time job there. … I learned to use the intercom and I got to know all the teachers, etc. So, the principal asked me if I'd like to work there part-time. So, I said, you know, fine. Part-time extended along a lot of hours sometimes, [laughter] and then, other schools learned [of me] and I soon was asked to go to middle school and I eventually landed in the high school.

JS: Full-time then, though, right?

HS: … No, I was only part-time.

JS: Oh, it's always part-time.

HS: Part-time. I only worked four hours, supposedly. [laughter]

JS: Yes.

HS: And so, I remained there until our son decided he's going to Princeton, and Joe didn't seek reelection to the Board of Education. … I returned to the VA Lyons in 1980 remaining until 1985 at the time Joe retired. Then, I realized, see, I had resigned six months short of my twenty years. So, then, was that when I went back, for the six months. In '86, when Ellen got married?

JS: When I retired, you quit, basically, and then, found out, if you kept on for another six months, you would be eligible for a twenty-year pension.

HS: Yes, so, I went back.

JS: So, she went back for that. I retired; I didn't resign.

HS: Well, you retired, but I resigned, and … later on is when I found out I lacked the six months. So, I went back in March of '86, … because you retired in '85, and I ended in August, yes.

JS: … You went in there for six months, and then, got out.

HS: Yes.

SH: You really did see a lot of change from 1944 to 1986.

HS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. When I got back …

JS: I got it there for you, that.

SH: Okay. [laughter]

HS: What?

JS: No, the things we were talking about. This is my write up for the fiftieth and it describes how we changed from an NP [neuropsychiatric] hospital into a …

SH: I believe that this sort of history that you have written, Mr. Salerno, would be a great thing to add to the oral history.

JS: Well, I'm giving it to you right now.

SH: Okay, great. We will put it in the file.

JS: Yes. I just made a copy right here.

SH: Great, thank you. I think this will help us with the editing.

HS: So, anyway, we're going far a field now, … when we're talking about my retirement and all, in '86.

SH: However, you really did see a lot of changes, as this reflects.

HS: Oh, absolutely. I'll tell you one [thing]; Building Four was one building I always think of when we talk of change. We go in there and they're remodeling Building Four. A year later, they're remodeling Building Four. I think, how many, four or five times, they remodeled it?

JS: Something like that.

HS: Now, you should see it. It is as modern as it could be, with a new façade and everything. … Of course, when I initially went, everything was typed and everything was hand typed. …

SH: Was it in duplicate, triplicate, and so on?

HS: Exactly. So, that was another condition; now, of course, all modern computers, just a totally different atmosphere. It's more the atmosphere of, I would say, … not conviviality, but an entirely friendly atmosphere, completely changed from that very somber beginning in '44.

JS: All the coloring.

HS: Brightly colored, imaginative, well, not decals, but decorations, the blinds, the drapes. … There were tunnels that were connecting each building. They were drab, they were yellow, they had little windows.

JS: You had to have a (one key?).

HS: Oh, yes.

JS: … For each building, you have to lock the door behind you every time.

HS: … You couldn't [just move freely]. You had to have a number one key, but the floor was a dirty, old linoleum. It was awful looking and everything was dark. You go there and it's brightly lit now, it's almost, … just [an] illusion, the idea that it's twice the size, the tunnels. … Now, of course, they have all sorts of modalities available there, but all thoroughly modern. It was quite a difference. …

SH: Even in 1986, it was starting to be remodeled.

HS: Well, in '86 … was the façade, the modernization, when I went in.

JS: … Just before I retired, we put in a ramp-type thing for wheelchair patients, which we didn't have. It was starting to, you know, move into [modern directions]. …

HS: And the ratio of patients to employees radically changed. We now had, what? nine hundred patients and eighteen hundred employees.

JS: Yes, just changed, just reversed.

HS: Yes, just reversed itself.

SH: Really?

HS: Yes, well, everything was specialization.

JS: … See, when I say students, [it] wasn't only residents that were coming in from the medical schools, [also from] nursing schools, audiology and speech were sending in students for training, hospital administration.

SH: Is Lyons still a psychiatric hospital?

HS: No.

JS: It was no longer a psychiatric [hospital]. … The changes began to come in during the '50s.

HS: Yes. So, it was quite, you know, a different atmosphere. The wards were brightly lit. Even on the Alzheimer's [ward], they tried to make it as cheerful as they could. … It was quite astounding at times.

SH: How do you think World War II impacted you as a young woman, when you look back on it now?

HS: … It didn't allow me too much of … an opportunity to really do much. … You know, we were … hemmed in by our rationing, by our lack of a lot of things, which, you know, … we didn't worry about it, *per se,* at the time, but, when we look back, … for instance, I went to my first Broadway play. I think my brother took me to *South Pacific*. I think it was my … first Broadway play, and I also saw *Tea and Sympathy,* which I hated, [laughter] but my ability to expand any horizon was very limited at that time. It wasn't until later, when I had the car, … when my girlfriend would call me, say, "We're going down to Atlantic City." I'd say, "Okay." We … took the train down to Atlantic City. [During the war, we] couldn't do that. You know, there were a lot of things we didn't do, but I don't think it bothered me. You know, I never felt that I was bereft of something.

SH: Do you think the opportunities for women changed?

HS: Oh, dramatically; … you mean at the time?

SH: Yes.

HS: Well, … see, you're talking about a very limited area and we were secretaries and that was what we were and I don't think anybody; we had a few women who were in charge of various departments.

JS: But, not service chiefs.

HS: No, but … I had Mrs. Connell [in] charge of communications.

JS: Yes, but that was a subordinate level.

HS: Oh, yes. …

JS: You know, you're talking about … the intermediate level. Women weren't up [in the] top management, except for nursing, and, even there, we had a male nurse as the chief nurse.

HS: That's right. … When you look back on it, you realize that it was very confined.

JS: You know, it was a different world. You know, when we went out to get a mortgage for our house, and she was still working, they wouldn't count her salary in, because, you know, "She'll end up getting pregnant and quitting." So, it had to be based on my salary and we had to put a big down payment down. You know, family, friends helped us, and they wouldn't give, you know, "We'll only give a twenty-year mortgage," and I'm talking about a mortgage [of] about ninety-five hundred dollars.

SH: Did you use your GI Bill to help pay for the house?

JS: No, because that was too difficult to get. … Most banks didn't want to handle the GI Bill, because [they] wanted the better interest.

HS: Yes.

SH: Really?

JS: So, in other words, we wanted to get the house, and, … you know, it would've taken too long to try to process it through the GI Bill.

SH: Was housing tight to get after the war? When you came back after Korea, was it difficult to find housing then?

JS: Well, no. … We moved in the first planned development in South Plainfield, was called Geary Park Development. They were these, oh, Cape Cod-type houses and there were a lot of them on the market. … The interesting thing is, I read in the paper about one in Geary Park, a pink [house], and we had a realtor take us out into that area to look at another house, and Helen said, "I didn't like this." … So, there was this thing on this pink house for sale. She said, "I'd like to go see that." I said, "I don't want to see that." [laughter]

HS: And that's exactly the way you talk.

JS: And, I'll tell you, we fought, right there in front of this woman realtor.

HS: "I don't want that house," he says. [laughter]

JS: See, she [the realtor] wanted to get us in, then, she would get her commission. I figured, "Hey, I just read about this house yesterday. … I'll call that number, deal direct." Well, we finally settled in my favor.

HS: Of course. [laughter]

JS: And we got home and I told her what the scheme was, and I called up and that started the whole thing going. …

HS: Her name was Alta Connell. Was she there when you were there, [as] the chief of communications?

JS: Yes, she planned my trips, when I went to Pittsburgh or anything.

HS: … She was the one I was saying, [referring to], and then, of course, the chief [of] dietetic service was female.

JS: That was the only [one], yes.

HS: Yes, Horton.

JS: Yes, but Connell was not a chief, you know. … Reihhll was the chief.

HS: Well, yes, over her, right. … She was a section [chief].

JS: Like a section chief, but, again, a predominantly female field, you know, all these clerical [workers]. …

SH: Had you thought of or had the opportunity to go for any of the "Rosie the Riveter" type jobs?

HS: No place. [laughter] We're in a rural area. They had the piston ring [factory].

JS: Yes, and she worked around the looms, and so, she didn't want to do that, either.

HS: No, that's right. …

SH: I was going to say, you already had this almost technical background from what you had done in cleaning the mills.

HS: Yes, well …

JS: Yes, but, see, she was a good typist, let me tell you, and a stenographer, and it served her well. … At the time, it gave her a lot of opportunity.

HS: Right.

JS: In this day and age, with that ability, she could have gone on to business school, college, or whatever.

HS: Well, … that's why our daughter and our son did. …

AV: If you had the chance to go to college, would you have done that?

HS: Oh, I would've, yes, … but, I mean, it was such a remote idea that you couldn't think of it twice.

SH: In raising your children, was education important?

HS: Oh, definitely.

SH: You spoke about Mr. Salerno being on the school board. Did your kids know, from day one, that they were going to go to college?

HS: Oh, I think they did. AT&T paid for her degree at St. Elizabeth.

JS: So, we give her a lot of credit.

HS: Yes, but the thing is, AT&T went under. [laughter]

JS: After what Princeton cost us, we needed everything. [laughter]

AV: Your son went to Princeton.

HS: Oh, yes, he went to Princeton, yes, graduated in '84.

JS: Then, he graduated Rutgers Law School, too.

HS: He had a great time at Princeton.

SH: Is there anything that we have forgotten to ask? [laughter]

HS: You tell me.

AV: Going back to the war …

HS: Okay, which is what you were interested in. [laughter]

AV: Was there any fear of being bombed or anything on the home front?

HS: No, I never felt that way. We were not in New York.

JS: … In Newark, we felt it. … You know, when the war broke out, I was sixteen and, you know, they started in high school and all, you know.

HS: We never did.

JS: And, you know, I'd be walking home and, if I'd hear planes, I'd think we were being attacked, [laughter] took time to realize that they were [our planes].

HS: I don't remember us ever going under desks or anything of that sort.

JS: But, they [her family] were up in the woods, you know.

HS: Well, not quite woods, but it was rural, [an] agricultural community. [laughter]

JS: … Where my mother's family came from, they were in the Apennines Mountains of Italy, the Basilicata area, I've been there, and they were isolated. When my mother left the village to come over here, she brought three children with her. They traveled by donkey, and so, what she did [was], because, you know, they were always getting into war over there, she took her two sons, the youngest, and gave them girls' names. So, instead of Nick, he was (Nicolina?) and my brother Pat was Pasqualina. This way, Mussolini, or whoever was there, was never going to find out that they were boys, because there was no contact with them. So, I'm saying Stirling was like San Costantino del Albanese. They found her brothers, though. [laughter]

HS: Yes, they found them all right.

AV: Also, I was going to ask, how did you keep in touch with your brothers when they were overseas? Was it through letters? Did they write home a lot?

HS: Just like with V-mail, you know, we'd get V-mail back, and I guess he [Frank] got our [letters]. I was not a very [consistent letter writer]. You know, I feel so guilty, I wasn't a very good … letter writer. If he got a letter a month, he was lucky. [laughter] Well, there was nothing to write about. "I went to school. I went to work. I'm home," you know, there wasn't really anything exciting to tell him, but he never begrudged it. He never told me about it. … I don't think Bill ever got letters from me.

JS: Well, you know, his wife …

HS: He had his wife and child with him. I figured he was already home with his family. Well, he was at Fitzsimons General Hospital. …

SH: Is that the Fitzsimons Hospital in Denver?

HS: Yes, yes, you knew.

AV: Did you know anybody who lost their life in the war?

HS: I told you the one boy from Stirling was one of the first draftees, I guess. He wasn't even eighteen, or I think he volunteered; I'm sure he volunteered. He was our first casualty. There were several others, but he was the one I knew the best. The others were older and they were more in my brothers' time frame. See, my brothers, they had more of an athletic bent, so, they had bike races and, of course, they played baseball and football, … but we're wearing out that. … Come on, let's have some [refreshments]. … Now, you want coffee, regular, decaf or what?

SH: Let us just see if there are any more questions on the list.

HS: Oh, okay.

AV: Do you remember where you were when you found out that the war had ended and your initial reaction?

HS: Where was I? Oh, just a feeling of relief; I wasn't in New York or any place like that. I was probably home, home or at work, and so, that's why I say I was confined.

SH: Working in the secretarial pool, did everybody really keep up with the war through the newspaper and the radio?

HS: Essentially. Well, it was the doctors and everything, conversation, yes. … You know, of course, that would be more at a time when it became more and more [pressing?].

SH: Did people expect the war to be over sooner or longer? What was the feeling? The war ends in Europe first and, obviously, your brothers do not get to come back right away.

HS: Right. Frank was scheduled to go to Japan when the V-E Day was [declared], and then, they changed his orders.

JS: Well, once there was going to be no invasion of Japan.

HS: What?

JS: Once there was going to be no invasion of Japan. …

HS: V-J Day, they changed his orders; no, just vast sighs of relief, because we now, then, knew my brothers were okay, and then, I'm sure, … you know, talk about someone who would have relief would be his [Mr. Salerno's] mother, but she still worried about him.

JS: Well, I was missing-in-action, for most of the time.

HS: Right, but she knew that Pat was okay. …

JS: Nick was still in the States.

HS: Yes, Nick was in the States.

AV: You two met after he served in the war.

HS: Oh, yes. I had to wait until he went to World War II and Korea. He had to do a double. [laughter]

SH: That was amazing when we heard about Mr. Salerno and the fact that he had been a POW, and then, he gets called back for Korea.

HS: Oh, tell them about your pay. I don't know if you had said that in the original [his oral history interview].

JS: I did.

HS: Oh, you did; well, tell them.

JS: No, when they called me in, you know, for a physical, I …

SH: You are talking about for the war in Korea.

JS: Yes, when I was called back, and it was by Truman, … I had never attended a meeting, a Reserve meeting, or anything. It was just, you know, I had the commission. So, I had to report and I went down there and I told them I was, you know a service-connected veteran, disabled, and the guy said, "Jeez, I'm glad you told us that." I figured he was going to tell me to go home. He says, "You know, you can't draw two government checks." He says, "You either can decline your VA disability compensation or your lieutenant's pay." Well, you know, you're talking about forty dollars on one end and, you know, I don't know, I think, … at that time, my lieutenant's pay would have been about thirty-four hundred dollars a year, which doesn't sound like monthly pay now. … I had to decide for the military pay, but that was the choice they gave me. [laughter]

HS: [Sarcastically] Isn't that nice? … That was very, very nice. …

JS: And it ended up being my best tour of duty, you know. I got most of my management skills and all from that.

SH: If Amanda has no further questions.

AV: I think I am good. I think you covered it all.

HS: Well, and then some. [laughter]

JS: And then some.

HS: We went really far a field.

SH: Thank you so much. …

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Anne Savage 2/11/10
Reviewed by Isaac Cohen 2/11/10
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/8/10
Reviewed by Helen Marko Salerno 10/4/10