

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HILDA DELLA CORTE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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MONROE TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Mohammad Athar: This begins an interview with Hilda Della Corte, am I pronouncing that correctly?

Hilda Della Corte: Yes.

MA: On May 4, 2016, in Monroe Township, New Jersey, with Mohammad Athar the interviewer. To begin, could you tell me where and when you were born?

HDC: Well, I was born on February 24, 1935, at eleven o'clock in the morning. I was born in Puerto Rico and the town that I was born is called Barranquitas, which is "little cliffs" if we are going to translate somewhat. I was born to a couple that already had a child, my oldest sister, and I was the second of three. So, I'm the middle child. And from there I do know that my parents separated a little while after I was born. I had an aunt that was childless and she took me. I was not adopted by them, but to help my mother who was the lady's sister. So, I was brought up by my mother, I called her mom too, and her husband, and I lived with them until I was a grown up. Of course, I knew my mother and I knew my family. Everybody knew that I was my mother's daughter, but that my aunt took me and raised me. I called my aunt mother.

MA: What were your parent's names?

HDC: Oh, well, my mother's name was Raymunda. My father's name was Pablo. Their last [was] name Melendes. Of course, Latin's keep their names. I never lose my name no matter how many times I get married. I'm always Melendes, which is my last name. My name is Hilda Rosa Melendes Marero Negrón Bonilla and so on. I could really trace myself back for many, many years.

MA: And where was your town located?

HDC: My town was located in the center of the island. It is right smack in the middle. It's what we call the mountains.

MA: Could you tell me a little about some your family history, maybe starting from your father's side?

HDC: Well, I don't know much about my father's side really, because I never knew my father. I did. I met my father maybe twice in my life. He was a farmer, but as far as that, I don't know much about his life. Neither did I ever meet his family. I know that my sister did. She was older. Later in life, I was taken to the city, San Juan, and once I left, I had no more reason to see my father, because they brought me as their only child. By the time I began to realize what happened, it was already many years. But my grandparents, they come from the Canary Islands in Spain, and they migrated to Puerto Rico before they got married, and there were a lot of brothers. They went to different parts of the island. That is my mother's father. He also was a farmer. He had a little farm. I do remember a lot about the farm and how they did and go about everything. We were Christians, we are Christians, and that played a big role in our lives, being Christians. My grandparents were very strict. I was brought up in a strict religion, faith, and a strict household. Now aside of that, I have to say that even though my grandparents came from

Spain, they were like the first born in Puerto Rico. So, it was their fathers or my great grandfather, the one that migrated.

MA: What about your aunt that you stayed with?

HDC: Well, my aunt, what can I tell you? Women in Puerto Rico stayed home. They didn't work. She was married to a man that was an apothecar. An apothecar is what you would call today a pharmacist. They owned a drugstore and he used to prepare the compounds from the doctors. Then, later on in Puerto Rico, they decided to change the rules and now the pharmaceuticals came into the picture, and they made the prescriptions already. Then, my father had to have someone come in and give him a title, because he was not a pharmacist graduated. He had not graduated. That's at the end. He sold the drugstore, and then, he retired.

MA: So, you were raised in San Juan?

HDC: I was raised in San Juan. I attended Catholic schools. In Puerto Rico if you are somewhat not so poor, but like the middle class, you usually send your children to Catholic school, because they have a better education, and of course, religious education was very important. So, I attended school from, I would say, the fifth grade. I think from the fifth grade all the way to high school I attended Catholic school.

MA: What was the school like?

HDC: Oh, it was wonderful. Well, you are young and school was my escape. I loved to go to school and I was not a good student, I would say that, but I guess I managed to pass. Definitely school was very interesting. I belonged to the girl scouts. We had lots of projects. I learned how to sew which is something that lady girls do. Needlework is very important, because I'm going to be a mother. They took care of that and they raised you more or less to become married and have a family. You're supposed to learn all these things in school. They taught you well. Not like the schools today.

MA: And was your school co-ed?

HDC: Yes, yes. There were boys and girls. The school classes were not that large. I mean, I don't ever think I was in a class that was thirty, more than thirty. It was less than thirty all the time. If there was more than they used to split, because I realize you don't learn too much when the classes are too big, because they don't give you that much attention. I mostly had nuns as teachers. They were Dominican nuns. So, they spoke English. It was bilingual, sort of, and that's where I picked up English. Of course, in the outside, I was always talking Spanish. In school I was not allowed in order to be able to become more fluent I guess. They put their foot down. There were many little incidents, like if you spoke Spanish when you were in a classroom, you were imposed a tax, which was a penny a word, or things like that. Of course, we didn't get too much money, and so, you had to owe the money if you spoke the language in the classroom. Sometimes I ended up paying twenty-five cents at the end of the week, which was a lot of money, but I know that they did it so that we would continue picking up on another language. Of course, we were taught that educated people speak two languages.

MA: When you were living in San Juan, were you living with your siblings?

HDC: No, no, I never lived with my siblings. My oldest sister went to special school for orphans. My younger sister, she stayed with my grandparents. They lived with my grandparents most of their lives. I didn't.

MA: Were you able to keep in touch with them?

HDC: Oh, yes. There was always Christmas and holidays. My parents were always--family is very important to Latins. To us it was very important. My aunt who raised me, she was one of the oldest; therefore she was looked up to by her siblings. Whenever there was any gatherings, everybody had to attend. So, I partook of all of that. It was kind of nice. I have nice, beautiful memories.

MA: And was there other family that lived with you in San Juan?

HDC: No, I would say that my parents were very nicely--we weren't rich, but we weren't poor. We were sort of a middle class. We owned our own home and we lived alone. My father and mother, my aunt and her husband, who I called dad, we had a beautiful home. We owned a car which was something not everybody did. I was considered rich by my siblings. I guess I was pretty well off now that I look back, because those were in the '30s and '40s, and not too many people owned cars. In their eyes, I was pretty well off.

MA: Sorry, maybe I missed this. The family that you stayed with, your aunt and your uncle, what did your uncle do for a living?

HDC: He was an apothecar.

MA: Oh, yes, sorry. You listed in your survey that your parents had a political affiliation. They were Democrats.

HDC: Well. I don't really recall that. I don't recall really except when there were political rallies and everything. We tend to be Democratic. My father was a Republican in his youth. Now later on, when the country was very poor, and then, we had this Democratic runner up who was a very brilliant man. His name was Munoz Marin and he headed the Democratic Party. They used to call it the Party of La Pava. La Pava is a hat. The farmers used to wear this hat to protect themselves from the sun and that's the symbol that he used. This man was very passionate about the poverty. Of course, we had the United States behind us. We were poor and a poor county, a third world country. We were pretty well off compared to others. I think the good Lord was always looking after us. I don't remember my father talking about politics, even though women used to vote. I remember them going to vote and everything, but as a child, I never paid any mind to that. I never voted in Puerto Rico, because by then I was in this country, and I came to this country young. Eventually I started to vote. I don't register. I'm an independent. I vote for who is going to be for the country. Politicians have certain agendas. I always look for the agenda that I think is good for the country. Not for me in particular, but for

the country itself, because we are a nation of--here I'm talking about politics. Let's continue.
[laughter]

MA: You mentioned in your school that you were involved in various activities.

HDC: Yes. I'm not sports minded, but I used to play volleyball. I'm not sports minded, but I used to go there and hit certain balls, tennis. Not that I was good at it. I played baseball, which I found very boring, because it's too slow for me. I did nonetheless. I had participation when it came to the school. I was for the school. I am always for the good of the group. So, I did partake in some activities. Not too many, but I did.

MA: What was San Juan like at this time?

HDC: San Juan was beautiful. San Juan itself is an island and there are bridges that go into the island. They used to close it at night at the beginning when the Spaniards were there. There was a key to the city. I went to school in the city in a convent called St. Thomas Aquinas. I enjoyed it. All the commerce was there. It was very interesting. It's very Spanish looking with all those walls around it. The city itself hasn't changed much, because they have kept it as it was. They do have, occasionally, here and there some of those bankers who buy a piece of land, but, as a whole, the city has remained very Spanish. It was nice. It was very nice and it changes. It keeps on changing.

MA: You mentioned that you were living in a very religious household.

HDC: Yes, we went to church. Church was important and I went to Catechism. I went to a Catholic school so we have theology, something that I love myself. I will say this to you. My parents were Christians, but I was always taught to think for myself. You are a Christian. We are Christians. That's our look. When we look, this is our belief, but don't be a Christian to please us. Be a Christian to please yourself. It's very important to know. So, that's the way I've always been and I am a Christian, because I believe it as the word of God. I believe in the Trinity and I believe in Jesus as the Lord. It's something that I have been always very proud of. I allow you to be whatever you want to be, because we have to love other people. Christians love people even if they are their enemies. I don't say all of them do, because they probably do not embrace the faith that way, but Christians are supposed to be forgivers of their enemies. I believe in that. I believe that everybody has the right to be free and do their thing. Not libertine, liberty. To be able think for themselves and to be able to apply their reasonable thought. There's a lot going on. You have to be practical, but you have to be true to yourself. That's what I was taught as a child growing up from my parents.

MA: In the late thirties, early forties, America was hit by the Depression. Did that affect your family in Puerto Rico?

HDC: Well, I was born in 1935. I know that there was a Depression, but looking back ignorance is bliss. I was a child. I always ate. We always had food. I know that there were a lot of people that probably were not eating, but did I know about it? No. Did I confront that situation? No. I was not ever affected by it. So, to me, everybody was fine, but I am talking

about the way I looked at things. Later on in life and now, I was not always very happy that my mother let me go with my aunt. Why? Why didn't she keep me with her? Today I realize that my mother was doing me a favor. She wanted me to be the best I could be and she was not able to do that for me. So, she sacrificed herself, not to have me around, so that I could accomplish something, which I did I think.

MA: Around this World War II period you said your father was in the service?

HDC: No, my father was not in the service. My father was too old already to be in the service, because my aunt, who I call mom, was married to a man that was twenty years older. So, my father was not in the war. All my uncles went to war and they were, what do you call--they called them to war by the Americans, and they were happy to go. I have cousins--no, they were second cousins to me, but cousins of my mother that went to war, and were prisoners of Germany and escaped, and they did suffer some incarceration. Others of my uncles went and were stationed in Panama, which is closer. They all did. Not my father. My father was not, but my father was very involved in helping with the effort for the war. He was interested in collecting, what do you call it, scrap metals and all that for the effort, and I remember that. I was still very young, because remember, '35, I was what, seven years old. We are talking about a time in my life that I used hear my father talking about the war. We used to have a nice radio that we used to sit down and listen to the president speak on short wave radio and all that. So, we were very interested. I remember that and I remember my father reading out loud the paper, the newspaper. Of course, it's not like today that you get the information immediately. By the time we got it was already done with. I do remember my father being interested and rooting for ourselves, because Germany was a very terrible regime, and that's what I remember.

MA: Do you know if your uncles were drafted or did they volunteer?

HDC: Drafted. They were drafted. The draft went to everybody.

MA: The draft was in Puerto Rico?

HDC: Oh, yes. The draft was in Puerto Rico. We named streets like 65 of infantry, which was all mostly Puerto Rican. So, we did. We partook in the war definitely. The women used to belong to the USO [United Service Organization] and they made dances and helped the veterans. That was part of it, not because I was there, but because the aunts, my aunts. My grandmother had sixteen children, mostly guys. They all went to war and the sisters stayed, but they all wanted to help the cause and they did. They partook of this thing.

MA: Did your school also help the war effort?

HDC: Yes, definitely. We had wonderful nuns that were very inventive about things and the cigarettes, in those days, used to have that silver cover. Puerto Rico was very damp. They used to put that into the cigarettes so that they would not get moist. I remember finding it in the streets and peeling it off, and you made balls of these things. That was part of our effort for the cause. Other things, we collected dry food to send to our soldiers. I wasn't thinking about the

American soldiers, because we had the Puerto Rican soldiers, but we did. We had an effort going on, yes.

MA: You said you were listening to the radio, so were you following events?

HDC: Yes. I was following events when my father came. I couldn't care less, but when my father came, come, let's gather together at the twilight. We sat there and after, "What does that mean," I used to ask. He would say this means whatever and he would explain. I was the only child that they had, even though I was not their flesh and blood. My father was very interested and he wanted me to be interested. So, he used to teach my mother, who also like [other] women, he would teach them religion, because he was more involved in this thing. Our culture is different. The man is supposed to be the know-it-all. The women are supposed to be more submissive. Not that my mother was submissive, but my father was the law. Whatever he said, if my mother didn't agree with him, she would say so, but they would have discussions about it while I was sitting there. The discussions were never anything but peaceful. My mother would say, "I will not." I remember her saying, "I'm not going to vote for that man because of this and that." My father used say, "All right, calm down, let's go." He contributed to my upbringing about listening to other people's right to speak. He loved Gandhi, I remember at that time. That is a man of peace. That kind of a thing. He was more or less like that. He believed you could accomplish more with peaceful means than with too much argument.

MA: Was he ever politically active?

HDC: No. He was political--I have to retract that. Before my father became an apothecar, he went to school more so than others. Not that he went to college for four years, but he had a high school diploma. For those days it was like a college education. My father was everything. He was a very knowledgeable man. He did run for judge, peaceful judge. In our town where there were not that many educated people, my father was the judge. He used to marry people and he used to get things from the United States that went into the Alcaldia, which is the seat of the mayor, and my father was part of it. They divided whatever it was, the food that came and everything else for the poorer. My father was a judge. So, I imagined that he had applied for that job. So, I guess he was political in that sense. That was in his youth. I wasn't even born, I don't think. My father, as I said, was twenty years older than my mother and by that time my father had done whatever, and he moved into the city. Then, he became an apothecar. He worked for drugstores and I guess he learned the trade. I don't know much about it. Believe it or not when we are young we don't pay attention too much. I was inquisitive about a lot of things, but I knew he knew more than me, because he used to sit down to teach me math and I'm still poor at it. [laughter]

MA: What was the feeling towards this relationship with the United States?

HDC: Oh, he was Americanized. My father thought that it was a wonderful thing for our country to be a part of the United States, because under Spain he was more--no, he was already Americanized then. Spain did very little and we became a commonwealth state, and being a commonwealth state does not give you the right to vote, but nonetheless we are able to get other benefits. So, my father was for it. In later years, when the country wanted to become a state, my father wanted to become a state, but he died in 1965 I think, my god. I don't even remember

that, but the movement is bigger. People are not signing for it, because we have no representation. You can't vote. However, we can vote for the primaries, which is so ridiculous. I don't understand that. I don't know. It's very confusing and I think very rigged.

MA: So, let's talk about high school and what that experience was like for you.

HDC: Oh, high school was wonderful. I went to a Catholic school, I told you, in San Juan and it was called St. Thomas Aquinas. I used to have a wonderful nun whose name was Sister Octavia. She was my mentor. I loved her. She was wonderful. She was very old at the time that I became a student, but I like to think that I was one of her favorite students. Because of her--remember I told you at the beginning that I was not a great student, but I became a great student because of her approval, because of her encouragement. I don't think people are stupid. They just become put down by a lot of teachers. The nuns, to me, were very wonderful in that way, where they wanted the students to do better and encourage them. She did encourage me. I did take my test to go to the university. I did get some help from the government to get books and so on and so forth. I never even ended it. I went, but by my mother, my aunt, was in the States, and she had an accident. I had to postpone my schooling and come to give her a hand, because she was not able to take care of herself, and that's when I came to this country. That's when, at the time, I used to come to visit her, because I didn't want to be in this country. The school here was not what I was used to. It was difficult for me. I came, I stayed for a little while. Then, I went back. When I graduated high school and I was ready to go to the university, and I did get a scholarship for books and things like that, I could not take advantage of it, because my mother then had an accident. She was not able to take care of herself and I came here. I did other things to be able to help her, because she was in need. That is what I was taught, that today she was my mother and she helped me and she brought me up. Now she is in need and I have to help. I'm okay with it. I didn't finish any college, it's true, but I'm okay with it. I'm a reader.

MA: So, you visited the United States before.

HDC: When I was fourteen years old I visited the United States, but then, I went back home and I continued my college. I came to help my mother. Not to help my mother, but I came to visit. She was not disabled at that time. When I first came, I was fourteen years old, but I went back. I would come, and then, I would go back, and only would come here during vacation time. Then, I would go back. When I finished high school and I was just ready to go to college, I had to come back. That's when I stayed. I was eighteen years old then.

MA: Which part of the United States were you visiting?

HDC: I came to Brooklyn. Brooklyn, where my mother used to live. I like Brooklyn, but I'll tell you something, which is something that I have found. When you come with the idea that you belong, and when you come with idea that everything is wonderful, everything is good, things happen. Things are good and things are wonderful. I did encounter prejudice. It's not that the country was not good for me, but the people around it. I came to the conclusion that the people that are the most prejudiced are the people that have the least knowledge about anything. People are prejudiced, because they're afraid. They're frightened. They don't know. For instance, when I was in Puerto Rico, I worked for the telephone company, for the Puerto Rican Telephone

Company. I was able to do that and go to school, made a little money. However, when I came to the States, I figure I'm going help my mother, but I would like to have a job. I went to the New York Telephone Company to apply for a job. I took a test. They give you a test. Then, they ask you to read some papers and everything else. They plain told me that I had an accent and they are not going to have an operator that has an accent, because it's not good. The people don't understand you. I took it all right. I figure, it's true, I have an accent. So, I understand this. Now when I say it, people say they were prejudiced. Yes, I noticed then, because I started to read, that in those days you didn't have to be politically correct. They would tell you have an accent; you can't work here. I figure, well, I come to this country, and I guess I have to follow the rules. I'm not a rule breaker. There are many things that are established today that are supposed to be politically correct, but too much of a good thing is no good. You have to follow the middle. Yes, you should have the ability to speak your word, not with anger, but do I have to have it? Today I pick up the phone and I call, and I don't understand the person that is talking to me on the other side. I say, "Where are you located?" "Well, I am in India." Oh, that explains it, but what I'm saying is now it's--I say, "Will you please repeat what you are saying," because I don't understand. Or when I call my husband's insurance company and my husband is blind, and I have to do the calling. I will say something like I am interested in this and they tell me an answer. I will say will you please repeat that again, because I don't understand it. You think they are trying to sell ... no, my dear. It's not that. I can't understand it. When they tell you is it all right for you to make a comment, I say yes, I'll make a comment, and that's the first comment that I say. I think that your telephone operator's talk too fast. So, I get my two cents in. Do you understand what I am trying to say? Politically correct doesn't mean if you have an accent, wonderful. I welcome you, but now I wasn't allowed to work in the telephone company, because I have had accent. Now I understand the true meaning of why they wouldn't give me a job. I probably would have gotten a lot of knocks from a lot of people. I don't understand what you're saying. I look back and even though I think they were prejudiced, they were okay by being prejudiced, because there were hundreds of people that couldn't understand it. Even when I go to the south of the United States, I don't know what they're talking about. There are many truths. You have a truth and I have my truth. There is a truth somewhere, the real truth, but you have a truth and I have a truth. and the truth lies between those. I'm accepting and I love--I never found myself calling people prejudiced. Now I understand that it wasn't prejudice. It was really ignorance. Most of the people that are against me are ignorant. So, I forgive them.

MA: Just to back track a little bit to high school. Did you also work while you were in high school?

HDC: Yes, I worked for the telephone company.

MA: You worked for the telephone company, yes. Did you have any other jobs during your time there?

HDC: Yes, I worked for the telephone company. After the telephone company, their schedule was not that great for me to be in school. So, I worked for the Carib Hilton in the switchboard. After school I went and I then I would come home and that's how I had the job.

MA: When did you graduate high school?

HDC: In 1953, May of 1953.

MA: After high school you said you were planning to go to college?

HDC: Yes. I planned to go to the UPR, which is the University of Puerto Rico, but I didn't. I didn't make it, because I told you of my mother. But I went to a school. I said to my mother, "I'm doing nothing around here. It's ridiculous. " I used to take care of my mother, put everything aside, cook for her and everything else. Then, the rest of the day I had nothing to do, but to stay in an apartment. So, I said to my mother, "I think I would like to learn something, learn a trade." She said, "That is a good idea." So, I went to school for, what the heck did they call it, cosmetology, fixing the hair and the nails and all that. I enjoyed that. I said, "Why not? "I'll always have a nice haircut." So, that's what I did. That took six months. Believe it or not, I worked very little for that. Then, I applied for Pan American Airways. In those days speaking another language made it very lucrative and I did. I became an airline hostess. I did that and I worked for Pan Am and I worked for another one called Trans Caribbean. Then, we went into American Airlines. So, these were jobs that we did, because there were always strikes, but that's all I did. I got married and I had children. I became the mother and I sew. That's the reason I sew.

MA: When did you move officially to the United States?

HDC: I moved in August just before school started. I moved in 1953. I moved to the United States with my mother, but every year I went to Puerto Rico. Every year I went to visit my grandparents and my family. From 1953 until 1960, I worked in those airlines, and then, I got married.

MA: What was that like, leaving your family in Puerto Rico to stay with your mother in America?

HDC: It was fine. She was my mother and what she said goes.

MA: Was the transition to living in America difficult for you?

HDC: No, it wasn't at all. America was always very good to me. First of all, I brought already my way of life. We were religious. So, I had freedom of religion. So, I went to church. My parents were very strict. I was not allowed to date. I was eighteen. Dating was something that was peculiar, because now we are in an environment of many races, and I don't think that went very well with my family. When you are of a certain outlook, you want your child to be married to the same people, and I don't like Latins. They're too much of a womanizer. [laughter] I used to say to my mother, "No, that guy had about fifty girlfriends. I don't want to go out with this guy." My mother says, "Oh, yes, but he's Puerto Rican." "No." Do you remember what I told you? My father taught me how to use my brain. "What's the difference? He's a nice man, but I don't want to go out with him." They drink too much. Puerto Ricans, Latins, love to drink. They have a social Friday and they don't know how to drink. Everything in moderation I will accept, but they get drunk. That's not moderation. I did not like to go out with somebody that I have to take care of. For God's sakes I'm going out with you. I got to take care of you? No. I

was not very much for that. I like other people. I love the Italians. They were pleasant and they were very nice. The Latins knew how to dance. That's the only thing that I miss, but there were some Italians that knew how to dance, but you can't dance all your life. You have to let it go. I had no problems. I had problems with their mothers. Do you know what I mean? Their mothers, like my mother, wanted their Italian son to be married to an Italian girl, but I understood that. So, I didn't think that this lady was against me. That is her upbringing. She was ignorant, that's all. So, I didn't mind and I had my share of boyfriends that were Italian, whose mother didn't want me to marry them. I understood that, because my mother wanted me to marry Puerto Ricans, but I was not happy. Those were the times that I found kind of hard if you are in love, but in the long run, things work out for you. I was always someone to pray for a wonderful husband. Somebody that would come and I would be able to be a good wife, and I would have my children. We raise our children and my girls are beautiful. I'm happy to have been in this country and I'm happy to live in this country, because they are very tolerant of everybody. That sits well with me.

MA: The neighborhood that you were living in Brooklyn, it sounds like it was mostly an Italian neighborhood.

HDC: Yes.

MA: Were there other Puerto Ricans there?

HDC: Oh, very few. My mother owned the building. We were the only Puerto Ricans in that building, but mostly Italians. They were all Italians. Then, my mother rented another apartment that came at that time, and she rented it to a cousin of hers. So, we were the only two Puerto Ricans in there. There were other Puerto Ricans, but not in that neighborhood. We were far and in between. Puerto Ricans were more in the cities. I lived in Manhattan, Manhattan Avenue, and Spanish Harlem. It was crowded with Puerto Ricans, but when we moved into the suburbs-- I lived in Manhattan first.

MA: Okay.

HDC: And then I moved to Brooklyn. I stayed, and then, in Brooklyn we lived in a very nice area, and then, more Puerto Ricans started to move. It was fine. I didn't encounter a lot of prejudice. The people were very nice. Most of them were Christians and when you are among Christians, they were very decent to me. There were a lot of Jewish people too. To me, they were very nice. They were very tolerant. They stayed mostly with themselves, but I've been to the synagogues. I love religions. I like to read about religions. I'm interested in that and I like the people. Religions are religions. That is your right to believe, but as a person, kind and tolerant. Most people are very nice. Of course, some of them have agendas and I don't know that, but you could tell. I'm not eighty-one for nothing. [laughter]

MA: Were you able to attend a Catholic church?

HDC: Oh, yes. Beautiful.

MA: There was a Catholic Church near you.

HDC: Yes, but when I want to speak to my God, I could go anywhere. I don't have to go to a church. I could go to another Christian church or I could go to a synagogue, and sit around and talk, if I want that quiet. My thoughts are very important. If I am quiet in my thoughts, I speak to the Lord that way. I don't need to go to a place of worship.

MA: When you got the job with Pan American Airlines, you were still living in Brooklyn at the time?

HDC: Oh, yes.

MA: How did you get this job?

HDC: Well, you applied. For some reason, in those days they would state in the newspaper that Pan American was having interviews. Hundreds of people went. So, you stayed there and you fill out an application, and then, you go into this person. They ask you questions, blah, blah, blah. They speak to you in Spanish. "How many languages do you speak?" "Well, I speak three languages: Spanish, Portuguese, and English." "Oh, okay." They talk to you and everything. Hey, this girl can go to the Latin countries and Portugal and maybe to Brazil. Okay, that's it. That's how I got the job, my friend and I. She's going to come soon. Not today, but she and I know each other about sixty years, and that's how we met. We are still friends.

MA: What did your job entail?

HDC: My job was a glorified waitress up in the air.

MA: What was that like?

HDC: Well, it was nice. In those days, you had first class who used to have a better seat and better food. They used to serve you with dishes and with silverware. If I happened to be assigned to first class, I liked it, because you could have nice food. Of course, that went by seniority. If you were a purser, then you could anything you wanted. When I started, I started by the coach side in the back. They would give you these dishes came and you put them in the oven and you warmed them up and you brought them about. They used to sell liquor and in those days they allowed you to smoke, which was terrible. You go around giving them out. They were given out. They gave you a little box like that with three cigarettes. They had different kinds. Oh, would you like Camels or would you like Marlboros? You like this? You went around serving and being nice, putting things away, or giving pillows. You accommodated the people. It was a wonderful job, because you were able to travel, and you didn't have to pay for it. In those days you used to travel to Europe, to France, Germany, and England. Of course, we went to Frankfurt many times. You went to the Spanish countries and South Americana, Central America. What other opportunity would I have had had I not gone through there. I probably would never have seen the world in that manner. Today you ask me, do I want to go to Europe? No. It's not the Europe I knew. We went to Beirut. We went to different areas. I can't even remember anymore. I forget a lot of things.

MA: When you went to these different countries, how long did you stop there?

HDC: You had to go and you had to wait so many hours before you can go back again. They have to give you that, because in those days it took a long time to fly from point A to point B. So, I would say I used to come back in two days. I like Latin America. It was easier and as you get seniority, you pick your destinations. I liked to go to Puerto Rico, because it was you went today, and then, you could come back tomorrow, but if you ended up going Friday, you stay Saturday and Sunday, and come back. I liked that. I used to visit my family in that way. So, I did pick a lot of Latin America. We used to go to Venezuela and in those days it was better than it is today. The Latin American countries, Brazil, of course, I did several runs there. It takes a few days, because there is always a layover group of people that could take the next flight back. So, it was well managed.

MA: You were able to get out and explore these places?

HDC: Oh, yes. I did a lot of exploring in Columbia and Argentina. Argentinians are very macho guys; you know what I mean? I shouldn't talk about that, because it's not to the point, but I didn't care for it. They are very deceiving people. I would go out and buy--oh, I love this and it's beautiful. Well, it happened to me when I went out to buy a beautiful pocketbook. It's leather and you pay a lot of money for it. I said, "I will take it and you will mail it." I don't want this one, because this one has a scratch. Well, that's the one that they send me, the one with the scratch. They double talk. I don't like that. I can't stand devious people. That was the end of me going there. I didn't go anymore. No. I'm not going there. I don't like people to take advantage of you, because you are a nice person. In that way I was very sad about it, but I am blaming all of them because of that person? You know what I mean? I go back to myself. I say forget it. I don't talk about that.

MA: So, you were going to these countries mostly in the '50s?

HDC: In the '50s, yes.

MA: What were they like back then?

HDC: They were much better. Now, I don't recognize some of these countries. There is an influx of a lot of different people. It's not the same. However, not because of that. I don't like the terror that is going on in these countries. Not that in here we don't have them, but I find a lot of terror going on. I feel saddened for the people and the lack of compassion that there is in the world is what bothers me most. I have gone, in fact, I was just asked if I wanted to go to Greece. I said no. My husband, of course, is blind. What are we going to do in Greece? He can't see anything. So, I stay here. I already saw Greece. Greece, everybody there goes around in black in those days. I don't know how it is now, but in those days, all the women, beautiful, young girls in black. Everybody has sorrows.

MA: What was Europe like at that time?

HDC: Beautiful. It was nice and beautiful. There was a lot of prejudice, let's say, in France. France didn't like Americans even though we went there and fought for them, but I found it as ignorant people. Americans are very peculiar and they are used to the best. You know what I mean? You're going to go the hotel. They want a hotel. There are accommodations that are clean. As long as they are clean, well, you're going to pay them ten dollars, you are going to have accommodations for ten dollars, but they're always complaining. They complain a lot. I didn't complain much, which was bad, to complain. It was very beautiful if you were able to get out and go to, let's say, to France in the museums, to the different places that tourists go. It didn't happen to us, because we didn't have that much time. You need a little more time. A day, two days. You have to go only around there. Even though I did go out and enjoy, I didn't sleep, because if you got there and if you sleep too much, the next day you leave. I found that with the little that I saw; most people were very pleasant. Italy, I liked Italy. They were friendly and very accommodating. If you try to speak the language, they were more friendly to you. It's like everything. People want to know that you support them. Latins are like that. Now they open Cuba, let's say, for instance. Well, the Cuban people are very friendly. Of course, you're going to find happy people. They were always friendly and happy people. They were always laughing. You didn't find that in Germany. In Germany they were very strict. Fraulein, how do you do? [laughter]

MA: What was the longest flight that you had?

HDC: The longest flight that I had, it was in Frankfurt. I went to Frankfurt and I stayed about a week, only because we used to transport troops. We landed in Frankfurt and we had this troop. They left and another group that had to come back, so we stayed a week. That was the most. We were in Frankfurt and we went all around. It was a wonderful stay. We stayed at a hotel that I remember was the Carlson Hotel. I loved it. It was the longest and aside of that it was, and after a while, it became a job like everything else. Too much of a good thing, then you say, oh god, I can't wait. When it was vacation, I don't have to get up to go to the airport, but it was nice. I must say that I enjoyed very much my stay and my going back and forth, anticipating what I was going to do. Living too much in the future is not good, but it was the anticipation that made it nice.

MA: You were moving passengers, but you were also moving military passengers?

HDC: Oh, yes. That was when I worked with Trans Caribbean, which was a nonscheduled airline. They moved troops around. That was when there was a big strike that went on. Everybody ran around trying to get a job, because you wanted to work. I mean you need to work. So, that's how that ended up.

MA: Did the strike affect you in your job?

HDC: Sure, because they were not working. They were not flying. Eastern Airlines, American Airlines; they went on strike. My friend and I got a job on this airline called Trans Caribbean. That is no longer. It was bought by American Airlines and now it's American Airlines. All these people, they did a lot of--what the hell do you call it. They used to have a name for those. You took groups of people in the military to different areas. They were called MATS.

MA: You said you were married in 1978. How did you meet your husband?

HDC: My husband was a fireman. He was a fireman and he was introduced to me by a friend who just died. That's how I met him, through somebody. That's when you meet the nice people. I was married before I met this husband. My first husband, with whom I had four kids, I was married in 1959. He died and I met this husband in 1978.

MA: What are the names of your children?

HDC: Well, my oldest daughter's name is Deanna. Then, comes Audrey, Lisa, and Brenda.

MA: What are they doing?

HDC: They are married and having babies and taking care of babies. My oldest daughter just became a widow. Her husband was a pilot for American Airlines. He died about four years ago. So, she's been a widow. Now she has a little part-time job somewhere and she lives alone with her daughter. Then, I have a daughter named Audrey. Audrey is married to this man. She doesn't work, but she is a teacher. She works whenever they call her and she has four kids. She doesn't work, but sometimes she works. I have another one, her name is Lisa. Lisa is the most educated of all of them. She has four Master's degrees, but she doesn't work as a teacher. She has a lot of schooling and nowadays if you have too much school, you don't get a job, because they can't pay you. I don't want to go there, but she works. She has two daughters. Then, I have another one named Brenda. She has three children. She has a part-time job, because she still has babies at home. Their husbands at least make a good salary, I must say. They are very, very good parents. I'm proud of my girls.

MA: You said your husband served in the military?

HDC: My husband did, yes. Both of my husbands. My first husband served in the military and this husband served in the military. He is a veteran.

MA: Where did he serve?

HDC: He served in Germany.

MA: Did he ever tell you any stories about his time in Germany?

HDC: Oh, a lot of German stories. Yes. Well, my first husband was stationed in Turkey. I have some stories about that, but this husband was stationed in Germany, and he was there during the occupation. He was a surveyor. He used to go around surveying and all that. He told us some stories, very cute stories. I would ask him to do it. I forget. Jokes never stay with me too much. He did say that he enjoyed Germany and he had a girlfriend in Germany. He did tell me a story about one time when he was surveying and they didn't wear uniforms, because they didn't want to clash with the people. This company was surveying in this area and I think the captain or somebody came along and said, "What are these people doing? They look like bombs.

They are wearing civilian clothes. How come they're not wearing their uniforms?" He stopped my husband and he started asking questions, and my husband said in German, which I don't know, "I am sorry, but I don't speak English." [laughter] Since he didn't know any German he left and everybody laughed. They didn't get scolded. That's one of the stories. My husband also loved to write and he has lots of stories when he was able to see. We have so many. He used to sit down and write and write. Here are some of his stories. We have a lot of stories that my daughter wants to copy and see if they will be good for a book, some day. This is my husband. This is Mohammad.

MA: Nice to meet you.

HDC: So, if you want any more stories he can tell you.

MA: Maybe we can interview him some day.

HDC: Yes, sure.

MA: He worked as a fire fighter?

HDC: Oh, yes, in Manhattan.

MA: So, you lived in Manhattan?

HDC: No, I lived in Long Island. He served in New York and he lost a lot of his friends in 9/11, no, not his friends, because his friends are retired, the children of his friends. So, he was always at one of the funerals.

MA: So, how did you come to this community? When did you come here?

HDC: Oh, this is a story. A few years back my husband said, "I don't know. I am ready to die." Well, he had many problems. I've never seen the United States of America. So, I said let's sell the house and let's go see the United States of America. So, we did that. At the time my daughter had twins so we sold the house and we came and helped my daughter with the children. She had twins. Then, my husband and I travelled the United States and we went on cruises and so on, and then, when he came back, he says; "Now I want to have a home, or we could go to live in Florida." So, I told my daughter. I said I want to get a place. Of course, New Jersey was not my choice, because I guess I didn't know New Jersey, but that's where she lived. I said to my daughter, "Find me a place that I could move to yesterday, because my husband wants to go to Florida. I don't want to go there." So, she did. She had a girlfriend whose mother lived here. We came and we bought the house here. We moved and that was thirteen years ago. Time flies. I gave you my life story in an hour and half of it is not there. You know what happens? You forget a lot of things, because you don't think about these things. Sitting here I am beginning to remember more things.

MA: If there is anything you want to share that is not related to my questions, you are welcome to share.

HDC: Oh, well, it's okay. Maybe you will come and ask my husband to share his stories. They are more interesting.

MA: You have been here for seventeen years?

HDC: Thirteen years.

MA: Thirteen years. How have you seen it change?

HDC: Well. I have seen a change. Other groups are coming in. More Indians are moving in. The only reason I know this is that they wear the, what do you call them?

MA: Saris.

HDC: Saris, yes. They wear these saris, but they are very nice. I have some friends and we go to their functions and things. I know that now they have an Indian American Club. When we first came they had Italian Americans and Polish Americans and all kinds. Now they have an Indian American, but we all can go and partake of it. So, it's nice. I like to go when there is food involved. because I love Indian food. I enjoy it. You live here, but you're private. You know what I mean? You don't have to go anywhere. You can stay here and don't even say anything, and yet, when you partake of their programs everybody is very pleasant. But I look for that. You can't be hating Tom, Dick, and Harry, and then, go and enjoy it. You have to go with a good attitude about finding and making friends. I just met an Islamic lady. To me, she looked Latin. She comes from Egypt. She is very pleasant and very nice. I didn't ask her, she didn't ask me, we are friendly. She says hello, goodbye. They all have their own groups I'm sure. To me, I look at it like, hey, we are all coming from other parts of the world. The country is becoming very diversified.

MA: Were you involved in any civic organizations while here in America?

HDC: Civics.

MA: Maybe a church group?

HDC: Oh, yes, church groups. First of all, in order to that you have to have the ability to have time off. When you work, before when I was young and single, I was always working. Today I was here and I was sleeping, and then, the next day I had to go. So, it was not easy, but I belong to certain--to feed the poor, to go to these kitchens. I did that when I was in Brooklyn, but here, no. Now my husband needs me more since he is blind. He can't do things and I am the chauffer and I do all of that. I can't involve myself in much of that. Of course, that's an excuse. I could if I wanted to. At my age now there's younger people. Let me put it this way. Like I would love to belong to their gardening. They have a garden here that they grow food and all that. I love growing things, but it's too far. I have to be here to feed my husband. It becomes now a matter of time. Who do I give it to? I have to give it to the person I have to give it to. I think I wouldn't mind if they approached me I guess. Like Dave approached me for this. I didn't know

he was involved in this. He's a walker and I'm a walker, but I didn't know he was involved in this kind of thing, which is wonderful. I didn't mind sharing it. I don't have anything fantastic to share in my life.

MA: I think you told a very good story. I am coming to the end of my questions. I just had one more. The strikes you were talking about, was that in the 1980s?

HDC: No. That was in the '60s. Do you remember when we had that big strike for American Airlines and Eastern Airlines? It was in the '50s, late '50s. It wasn't in the '60s. I remember it was in the fifties, the end of '58, '59. That's when they happened. I don't remember why. I don't remember why it happened, but I think they were looking for more time. After that Eastern Airline lost a lot and they started to suffer, and so did American Airlines.

MA: Do you still visit family in Puerto Rico?

HDC: Yes, I visit some family in Puerto Rico. Now I am not being able to visit those people, because I have an aunt that's one hundred and two years old. She lives in Georgia. She calls me and talks to me on the phone. I don't have that many people in Puerto Rico. Well, yes, I have a sister and we talk on the phone, but most of what I have, I lost my mother and my father, my aunt and uncle, parents. Then, I lost my mother in 2004, my real mother. Then, I lost my grandparents. My uncles, sixteen aunts and uncles, they're all dead. Oh, no, I have one more left. One more uncle left and he is my age. No, he's eighty-four, eighty-five. He's eighty-five years old, but I have cousins. The families of all my uncles are my cousins and those are the ones I would have to go visit. Cousins are not that--the aunts and uncles fine, but when the cousins come and now they are married to somebody else and they move out of the area. I don't know where they are. The ones that are in Puerto Rico that are keeping in touch with me, I do those. I go and visit. There are others. Some of them live in Missouri. They are involved in other things, because now these are the cousins that are older. If I'm eighty-one, I'm talking about cousins that are older than me and younger than me. In their late seventies, that's already how many generations? Okay, now I don't want to go there. [laughter]

MA: Did you ever visit your old neighborhood in San Juan?

HDC: Yes, I go there because my sister lives around there.

MA: How has Puerto Rico changed over the years?

HDC: Oh, Puerto Rico is no more Puerto Rican. It's a lot of Cubans, Dominicans. They come from Venezuela. They come from all over. When you go to Puerto Rico--oh, Argentinians. They're all from every place else. People who are born in Puerto Rico are probably, no, I would say there are still some, but there's a lot of influx of others, but it's fine. They're good people.

MA: That was the end of my questions, but is there anything you would like to talk about, maybe something that I missed.

HDC: No, well, I tell you I think that according to what you asked me and according to what I remember, I am sure that I have a lot of anecdotes from my times and all that, but that doesn't come to the point. Like I love geometry and looking back into it and reading lately about geometry. Everything is geometrical and all that. It has fascinated me, but when I went to school to learn geometry, it was all about memorizing formulas. I didn't enjoy it as much as I am enjoying it now. That's about the only thing from my past that is coming into my future. I enjoy now reading about it.

MA: Okay. Thank you again for having me here and I will conclude the interview.

HDC: Okay, thank you.

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