

RUTGERS THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SARAJANE GIERE

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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Ilona Lyakhovsky: Hi, Mrs. Giere. It is such a pleasure to have you with us today. I read through your book, *My Pilot*, and I thought it was such a sweet dedication to your husband, Bernie. You focused a lot on your life with him, but I was hoping we could get started by talking about your early life and childhood as a city girl in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as talking about your parents, where they came from, how they met and how you came to be.

Sarajane Giere: Well, I would love to tell you, thank you. I grew up in St. Louis, as you just said. I was born there. My parents met in Washington, DC. Both of my grandfathers (my mother's father and my father's father) were Congressmen and they were [in office] during the Hoover Administration, 1929 to '32. They met at a Congressional ball and fell in love.

[Editor's Note: William Ignatius Nolan (1874-1943) represented Minnesota's Fifth District in the US House of Representatives from 1929 to 1933. John W. Palmer (1866-1958) represented Missouri's Seventh District in the US House of Representatives from 1929 to 1931.]

My first book was about the Nolan Family, my mother's side. She was the youngest of nine girls, quite a story. Now, I'm working on one about my dad's family in Missouri. My grandfather was a country doctor who went on to be a lawyer and was quite distinguished in Missouri. I was born and grew up in St. Louis, and went to high school there.

I wanted to go to college because I had an older sister, six years older, who went to Washington University in St. Louis. She majored in languages. I just loved college life because of her. I'd go and visit her Pi Phi room, and so on, and say, "I want to go to college." So, I went to a smaller school up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

I was born with a talent of drawing. I considered myself an artist at the age of ten. [laughter] That's what I wanted to do. Marvin Cone was a very outstanding art teacher in the Midwestern genre in Iowa. So, I went to Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I went to a very big high school and I wanted to go to a small college. I loved it there. That's where I met the man who became my husband, Bernard.

They called him "Ben," or he's had so many nicknames, "Beeg," they called him, "BG" (Bernie Giere). So, we met in college and he had come from Chicago. His parents were German immigrants. A lot of the people who came to Coe College were from Illinois, not many from Missouri, Illinois and Minneapolis.

So, he joined the Air Force ROTC, which, in those days, in the mid-'50s, if you went to that college, you had to give two years, your freshman and sophomore years, to ROTC. It was required. If you wanted to go further, if you liked it, which Bernard did, you could continue. If you passed, you could graduate from college becoming a second lieutenant, with your gold bars, and go right into the Air Force. So, that's what Bernie did.

Before that, we were so much in love, I went home and I said to my mom, "We want to get married." She said, "Well, honey, I think he's a wonderful person, but how are you going to support yourselves? You're both in college." After we became engaged, I came home to St. Louis and I worked for the telephone company. I was a service representative, making \$62.50 a

week. I saved all my money. We visited now and then. We wrote tons of letters to each other. He had a year to go.

Then, in 1961, at the beginning of his last semester, we got married, and moved back to college, lived in a little attic apartment. He became the commander of the ROTC. They picked a senior student to do this. He loved it so much. They taught him to fly out at the airport in Cedar Rapids.

The Air Force felt that if they spent the money for a young man to come and become a pilot and he hated flying, forget it. That was a big loss--so, let him fly a little Piper Cub, get his pilot's license, then, come in the Air Force and learn how to fly the big jets. That's what he did.

I worked at the phone company, as I said. Then, when he graduated, he was a second lieutenant. We had to wait four months before his training (in Texas) date. So, he drove a truck through Iowa, a seed truck, delivering to lots of farms there. I still worked at the phone company. Then, we went off to pilot training in Texas.

That's kind of what my life was like. I always loved art. When I came back to stay with my parents and work that year before I was married, I took night classes at Washington U in art. This was the time of the Hungarian Revolution. Churches in St. Louis sponsored certain people.

[Editor's Note: Beginning on October 23, 1956, Hungarians revolted against the Soviet-backed Communist government installed after World War II. Following an invasion and brutal occupation by Soviet forces, most resistance ceased by November 10th. Approximately 200,000 Hungarians fled the country after the Revolution and many settled in the United States.]

A wonderful portrait artist, who was Hungarian, escaped and came to the States and ended up in St. Louis. So, this one church supported him, set him up in this beautiful house, a Victorian-type house. He taught portrait painting. I took it at night that whole year I was there. I was really into it.

That's kind of the story of my early life. Of course, I did have an older sister. I didn't talk about her very much, but she was a love. She was a pianist--not a prodigy. Well, let's say she was very talented. She carried that spirit all through college. Then, finally, when her teacher said, "Are you going to become a professional pianist?" she said no. She chose something else.

My dear sister passed away years ago. So, that was my childhood. Because there were so many years between us, I was really raised as an only child.

IL: It seems, nonetheless, that you guys were connected by your creative talents. I know that you eventually became a teacher of writing as well. What was it like attending high school in the 1950s? You said you went to a very big school. Were there any memorable moments, in terms of classes, or, even in college, specific classes that stood out to you in the years since?

SG: Well, the most memorable moment I had is when I went back for my fiftieth reunion with my best friend, who has been my dearest friend since 1950 when we were in sixth grade together. We went to Webster Groves High School.

That was the time when they integrated schools. We had a black high school called Douglass High School. They closed it down and all the teachers, African-American teachers, and students were brought into our high school.

Well to prepare for the year that was coming, we went to assemblies. At the fiftieth reunion, people got up and talked about it. The assemblies were training sessions on how to love your fellow man and behave yourself and accept these new students. There was not one incident of racial animus or hatred throughout our high school, thanks to our partner program--one white and one black student for the transition.

Everything worked out fine. One of the women who was at her fiftieth reunion with us was writing a book about it, the whole, let's see, 1956-7 [period].

IL: You remember pretty distinctly the era of the Jim Crow laws, especially living in the Midwest, where it was such a hot-button topic.

SG: Very much. Besides, I loved the high school. It was junior high with the high school, so, we were combined. I loved walking down the hall and seeing the huge basketball champion walking with his cheerleader girlfriend. I was only in seventh grade, [laughter] but it was kind of neat to be [there].

Years later, they made a separate junior high, but it, too, was a great school. I still have some of the books, some of the poetry. My friend and I, we kind of commiserate together about what we learned compared to [others]--what we can quote, in other words, because we had to learn it. Anyway, those were good memories.

IL: Yes, you seem to have a smile on your face talking about it; seems like very fond memories.

SG: Yes.

IL: I was wondering, also, was it in high school that you started off with your volunteer work? I know you did start working for the American Heart Association as a volunteer. I wondered if that was in part due to your mom's position with them while you were growing up.

SG: Well, it was giving me a summer job, and my girlfriends. On "Heart Sunday," when we were younger, we would knock on doors and collect donations. Then, everybody would meet at Washington University in the gym. They had, believe it or not, all these tables throughout the gymnasium. Everybody would bring their pile of money from going door-to-door all over the city and they'd count it out.

So, I couldn't do that part. Of course, Mom was in charge of everything. My two friends and I would work in the coatroom. That was called "Heart Sunday."

So, I carried that mission with me when Bernie went to pilot training at Webb Air Force Base in Big Spring, Texas, which is way over by the Permian Basin. Also, I kind of worked with the woman in that town of thirty thousand people running the "Heart Sunday." I did the same thing in college. I said, "Let's do a charity for 'Heart Sunday.'" So, I did that in college for two years.

The National Heart Association is one of my favorite charities. Of course, my dear son had passed away four years ago. He was fifty-three, heart attack. So, all the proceeds of my book go to ALS, but I give quite a bit to the Heart Association, too. It's pretty close to me.

Carmen Bisignano: On the topic of your parents' employment, I saw that your father worked at Southwestern Bell. Was there ever a time when you were working together, given that you also worked there?

SG: Well, that's a good question. He was head of the salesmen. In those days, they called the ads "the yellow pages" and every phonebook had the yellow pages. He would train salesmen and go out through the state teaching them how to go in and sell an ad in the yellow pages. It was a big deal.

So, one summer, when I was in high school, he got me a job. He suggested that I work as a proofreader in the yellow pages. I mean, I'd go downtown, I'd go up to the big building and meet all these women who were older and married, and here I was. The job was boring, but it was fun. It introduced me to a big organization before all the breakup of "Ma Bell."

[Editor's Note: Prompted by the US Justice Department's antitrust lawsuit, in 1982, AT&T Corporation announced the divestiture of the Bell telephone companies. The breakup of the Bell telephone system entailed AT&T retaining control of long-distance operations with local operations going to regional Bell phone companies.]

IL: It seems like you started with a hardworking ethic from a very young age, because, as I understand it, when you moved to Big Spring, Texas, you were the only one of the Air Force wives that was not a housewife, that you were still working at the time as a sales rep, right?

SG: Yes. Well, yes, sales rep at the phone company was a pretty common position. So, I kept the job as I went from Missouri to Iowa to Texas. Yes, I enjoyed it.

IL: Did you feel, in a sense, kind of awkward (may be the best way to put it) being the only one of the Air Force wives who was working? I know that you bought *The Air Force Wife Handbook*, actually, and were using it for a lot of its advice. Did you find it very helpful in kind of immersing yourself, in becoming friendly with the other wives, or did you disagree with some bits and pieces of it?

SG: Well, yes, I learned how important it was. I kind of made fun of it, sometimes, because it was just so literal, "Oh, do this. Do that, don't do this." I think an awkward part of my life down in Big Spring is when I was interviewed on the local TV station. I'd never been interviewed before.

I talked about the Heart Association fundraising. The fellow that interviewed me was called Bruce Frazier and he dresses like a cowboy. [laughter] Anyway, I should have put that in the book, because it's pretty funny, but anyway. So, did you ever see the movie *Midnight Cowboy*? It's kind of a classic.

IL: No, but I've heard of it.

SG: If you ever see it, they found the dustiest little town for the first scene in it--that's Big Spring, Texas, with the outdoor theater and that. So, Bernie and I are watching it--in the '70s this movie came out--and we stood up in the theater, "That was where we lived for a year-and-a-half!"

IL: It seems like you did make friends. It seems like you eventually did find a community there.

SG: Yes. We all knew we were just there for a little over a year, but we had some pretty rowdy parties. It was almost like college. It was like all the guys had the same idea. They loved flying and, boy, they were excited. Yes, it was a lot of socializing. If they soloed on the jet, well, they got thrown in the pool, and then, we'd have drinks and the whole thing. So, it was like a big party, really.

IL: The boys seemed to have a lot of their fun in going through Air Force training and whatnot, but I remember you talked about this kind of pressure to have a perfect image, because what you do reflects on your husband and his military career. Can you describe that in some more detail, kind of what that looked like in your day-to-day life and how you perceived that?

SG: Well, we found a home. It was a little duplex. Most of the pilots and their wives settled in something like this, but another pilot rented a big place and filled it full of furniture.

We kept thinking, "Why are you doing this? We're leaving." Well, he couldn't pay for it. He couldn't pay his phone bill. That's when I would sit in the office--there were three of us--and see these guys from the base, "Oh, okay." They had problems because they overspent. They just couldn't accept where they were.

Working in an office like that and dealing with the public was a real lesson for me. My father told me, when I was young, when I got the service rep job, he said, "You'll never regret it, because dealing with the public is something that will hold you in good stead your whole life." It's true. My daughter was an airline stewardess for a while--it's the same thing.

Now, I go on in a big company and I talk to machines. I don't talk to people, [laughter] but it's a good habit to have, because it's easy to make friends. So, I really don't regret any of that, but it was a learning experience--part of life.

Shaun Illingworth: I am curious, because my mentor, she was a Navy wife around the same time that you and your husband were attached to the Air Force. She talked about how, at least in the Navy, you almost had a rank as a wife; your position was dictated by what your husband was

doing on the ship. Was there any kind of analog to that in the Air Force? Was your position in any way affected by your husband's position?

SG: Well, in those days, which I've learned, we had an officers' club and they had a club for the sergeants and non-commissioned officers. Then, I think they had one for the airmen. Now, it's all one big club, but, in those days, you had it [separated].

We were very close to our next-door neighbors. He was a sergeant, Ed Miller, and their kids. Most of our social life was with the other pilots and their wives, but we were friendly with other neighbors who were beneath Bernard's rank, and didn't seem to matter that much. I don't know, maybe Navy's a little bit stricter than [Air Force]; I think Army was a little stricter, too.

That's what I found. Of course, there was quite a line there for the generals. Every New Year's Day--I remember, I had my first pair of long gloves and a long dress--the General [Henry Viccellio, Sr.], and his adjutants and all the finery, we had to walk past them and shake their hands, like a wedding reception line, in the officers' club. You had to drag yourself on New Year's Day to do that. You'd been out partying the night before, but this is something you had to show up. That was kind of a rank-type thing.

Another experience that I had, when we moved to Tampa and lived at MacDill Air Force Base, one of the friends in Bernard's pilot class out in Texas, his dad was the commander of the base that we went to. He was a general.

So, here we were, a very young couple--I was pregnant with Lisa--and Butch said, "Well, you come in, my dad wants to meet you." So, we went to the General's house. That was an experience, to sit down at dinner with them and think, "Wow." He had a lot of rank. So, it was another learning experience.

IL: Speaking of Florida, I know you moved down there right after Big Spring, Texas, but you were pregnant at the time with Lisa. Was that kind of a big adjustment, moving while pregnant? Did you have any worries about the move and how it might affect you?

SG: Well, they changed his location. He was supposed to go to another base. On the way home, we drove up to see his folks. Then, the Colonel called and said, "Okay, now, you've got to go to MacDill in Florida." I said, "Oh, well, I was waiting to go somewhere else." "Oh, okay." So, that was kind of a big change, yes.

Well, being pregnant, I think the only thing that really got me--of course, I wrote in the book about how I couldn't get in the base hospital. I sort of assumed I could. The place was so huge. I thought, "Wow, that's really big," but I was glad it worked out the way it did. It was hard to believe it, because it was a big airbase that had been there for a long time.

You obeyed the rules. If they didn't have room for you in the hospital, they gave you twenty-five dollars and said, "There's your chit. You go have your baby somewhere else." So, that's what I did. St. Joseph's was a good Catholic hospital.

IL: Do you mind clarifying that? I understand, you said, the rules in terms of priority for the hospital ward--if you had conceived on base and been pregnant there, then, you would've been able to get a room--but we talked about rank before. Was that also a matter of rank, that if Bernie had been of a higher rank, you would have been able to get a room?

SG: Well, that's a great question, Ilona, but I don't know. I know when I was sick that night and I thought I was dying--my neighbor took me; Bernard was out on some thing out West, flying around--the General's wife came in. She got right in. I knew that, here I was, in the waiting room all night, and I guess I was a little ticked off, sick, that kind of thing.

I kind of overdramatized it, but I was upset, really, having a little, brand-new baby at home, and then, getting so sick. There, I could see it, when she came--now that you're mentioning it--"How come she gets it first?" but I understood. I understood.

IL: There was kind of the matter of every air wife knew their role, right? You talked about how, every time Bernie came home from one of his flights, it was like a honeymoon for you guys, but, in the meantime, while he was away, can you talk about those experiences? You talk about becoming very confident in your abilities. He'd send you letters about how to screw this down or fix this. What was that like, being an independent housewife, if you will?

SG: Well, I learned how to balance a checkbook. Of course, we were just a young couple, not a big corporation, but, to me, it was something, because I never had written a check in my life. That's ridiculous, isn't it? but I really didn't have a checkbook. So, I learned that and some other things. Of course, our neighbor was great, the Sergeant. You just made friends and learned things as you went along.

I can't think of anything that threw me, because we were a family and it's the same with any family. If somebody's not going to help you, there's somebody who will if you yell loud enough. So, yes, it was that way with us, especially when one of the pilots died. We all kind of pitched in with everything, with the wife and the kids and that kind of thing, but I felt I was going to be taken care of. Even though it was very difficult for me, I wanted to rise to the occasion.

CB: In that same vein, how did you stay connected to your husband, communicate with him either when he was away for a short time or when he was eventually deployed? What was that like for you?

SG: Well, we stayed in touch writing letters. When he was in college and I was at home working, we did. I reread them, oh, a couple years ago, when I was rereading Bernie's letters from Vietnam to write my book. I thought, "He told me stuff in there he had done in the TKE fraternity that I never knew, and it was so stupid and silly."

Then, my son-in-law was a TKE, too. He was telling [stories] the other night. I said, "Yes, Bernard wouldn't tell me, but he'd write me a letter and tell me what they did. It was horrible," but we wrote a lot. He sent letters from Vietnam.

He did call me through Bert Pratt, an operator, who was our little gal in California. She did this on the sly, hooked us up, we wives with our husbands, but it wasn't very common. It was a little rare, but I did get to talk to him and hear his voice. It was mainly through letters, actually, that we communicated.

I have all of his letters. He doesn't have any of mine, because he was told to burn them, because of all the local people that worked in there, washing and cleaning, would see the return address.

I was talking to one of Bernie's former squadron mates [557th Tac Fighter Squadron] when the book came out. I had a lot of calls from some of the fellows that were there. He said, "Bernie burned [them]? He believed that and he did that?" He said, "I didn't do that." Anyway, I would've kind of liked to have seen what I wrote to him, but I didn't.

IL: It seems that communication became an important lifeline. You mentioned Bert Pratt and I was wondering, women like her, did they help you have some assurance that Bernie was safe at the time? How important of a role did she play, in the sense of being able to give you, every once in a while, just that couple seconds of a phone call?

SG: Well, when you think that your husband is leaving--and, chances are, he might not ever come back--and then, you get a phone call and you hear his voice, it's completely overwhelming. Nothing was taken for granted. My son was in Iraq and Kuwait, and had an iPhone, all that communication. I didn't have any of that. So, that little phone call, every now and then, even if you have to wait in line for it, it was short, I heard his voice.

Also, I heard his voice through his writing, through the compelling immediacy of the voice. I could just see him sitting there talking to me, because it was at war and he also knew that he might not come home. So, what we were writing was really deep in the truth. We weren't just playing around. In other words, this might be the last letter.

So, people like Bert were very helpful. In fact, we've had several reunions, maybe four or five, I think, during the '70s, '80s and '90s. I found out that when the guys went to Hong Kong on R&R [rest and recuperation], they bought her a string of pearls. One of the guys that lived in California from the fighter wing presented it to her. They looked her up and presented it to her. I thought that was so nice.

Later, we tried to get in contact with her, but it wasn't like getting in contact today, going on Google. So, I never did, but some of them did. We wanted to show the gratitude, especially the guys.

IL: It's nice to see such rays of light in what was probably a dark time. So, I wonder how you (and even the other Air Force wives) dealt with the grief and reality of the situation, that your husbands might not come home or that they're in a dangerous situation.

SG: Yes, and, in order to accept that, you had to go through a few things first. It's like going into a freezing pool or at the beach and you want to put your toe in first. The first thing that made me realize that was, Coz Musgrove died. They lived a couple houses down from us. We

had just moved to Tampa after pilot training and he was over in Vietnam. I was shocked. I didn't know him, but I knew the wife.

[Editor's Note: Captain John D. Musgrove, a forward air control officer with the 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron, was killed in action on October 4, 1965, in Binh Dinh Province, South Vietnam.]

So, then, I saw the whole thing come together. In other words, this is why we're here. They're defending the country supposedly, or over there at war, and here we are and this is what we have to do in a situation like this. So, Nancy Musgrove--I met her at one of these reunions--she's the one that lost her husband, the first person that I knew.

She remarried. She had two boys. She sat there and I chatted with her at the reunion. She lived cattycorner from us. She told me the whole story of what it was like seeing that blue car in the driveway, coming up, with your groceries with your kids, and getting the news.

So, gradually, gradually, I came to accept that fact. I feel that my faith pulled me through. I'm a Christian and I prayed a lot. I found a new church. The prisoners of war, that's what was really hard. It's still hard for me, the POWs. A good friend of ours was a POW named Spike Nasmyth, wrote a book about six-and-a-half years in a Hanoi prison *2355 Days*.

Another book, *The League of Wives: [The Untold Story of the Women Who Took on the U.S. Government to Bring Their Husbands Home (2019)]*, is a great book, written by Heath Hardage Lee. She read my manuscript for me. She wrote about all the wives who were left in the States, their husbands were POWs, and how, at first, the government ignored them. Then, they became so powerful, and how they got those husbands back. It's a wonderful book.

All that was going on--I didn't know, of course--at the time, but just helping each other. I'd always loved military history. One of my uncles, he married my aunt and he had been in World War I. When I would spend the summer with them in Tulsa, he had a big library of books from World War I, World War II. So, I kind of fell into those, at the age of nine and ten.

I felt a part of history during my Air Force wife years and it made me grow up real fast. In fact, I met a woman later, much later, who said, "How could you manage when your husband was gone? I've never been apart from my husband." All I could think of was, "That's too bad," [laughter] because I think it gave me more strength to stand on my own two feet.

IL: Thank you for sharing. You mentioned that when Bernie was first being deployed, after you said goodbye to him and sat down in the car, you noticed that his cigar had been left on the dashboard. You seemed very upset about it when you wrote in your book. Did that kind of feel like a missed opportunity to say one last goodbye, or did that cigar have a special meaning to you in that moment?

SG: I think it grew out of proportion. I don't know why, but I just got so tearful about that and so mad at myself. To him, it meant nothing. He didn't smoke cigars, except when our kids were born. That's when he said [okay], but I don't know. In a way, it's kind of like a part of him,

because I could see all the guys there smoking the cigars and there's a cigar in my dresser or whatever. No, it was just very sad.

Everything was like wearing Technicolor glasses. Things were probably out of proportion because of the emotions that I [felt] or things I was going through inside.

CB: If you're comfortable talking about it, I know, in the survey, you had listed that you were willing to talk about the news that your husband's plane had gone down. I wanted to ask, while we're kind of on the subject, how that news was relayed to you, and then, how you responded to it. How were you feeling at that time?

SG: Well, I should have been expecting it, but I really wasn't. I was out hanging up diapers and I could see the kids. In the ranch house that we bought, there was a room on the back called like a Florida room. I could see the kids in there and I was wringing the diapers. The phone rang and I ran inside. She said she was from the Red Cross and she wanted to let me know that Bernie's plane went down, but he was rescued. I asked about the copilot, Jim, and he was rescued, also, but for the second time.

Then, I went back to the diapers and thought, "What?" [laughter] I went back and had to call again. I called the Commander's wife. It was just--I don't know. My mind was somewhere else when she was saying this. Maybe I said to myself, "Oh, this isn't real, but, oh, okay, all right. He is all right." If he had been killed, the blue car would've pulled up and the Chaplain would've come in (or the airman in charge) to tell me. They wouldn't have told me over the phone.

IL: On the other side, because of that incident where his plane went down, he was able to come home early. You had spent the entire time of his deployment kind of thinking, "November 1966, November 1966." That's when you had always said, in your mind, he was coming home. How did you react to hearing that he was coming home early, that, all of a sudden, it wasn't November 1966, it was now.

SG: Well, I was so happy. I just was very happy that he was okay. We didn't know when he would be coming home. Then, he called and said that he'd be coming home soon. When I got that call, either from him or somebody [else], that he was coming home, it was going to be the next day, I was just like a butterfly.

I flew around the house and I did a million things. I don't know--I washed my hair at one in the morning--and dah-dah-dah, and I did this and that. I was just overwhelmed with joy. Oh, I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe it. I was so thrilled.

We had one guy come home early because his wife died. Another guy came home early because his brand-new baby died of crib death. Bernie came home early because he was alive. It was wonderful. So, yes, I was very thrilled, very excited.

IL: Could you tell us more about the reunion itself? I heard that it was kind of a big night out on the town. Tell us about it, please.

SG: Oh, well, he walked in the door and he had some things. I don't know where he got them; oh, he stopped at O'Hare Airport. His parents went out to the airport. He was changing planes to come home from California, and he saw his parents; maybe he bought these little things for the kids. I don't know. When he walked in, it was like Santa Claus had arrived.

Lisa was all over him. She was almost three. So, I just let her and I put Paul in the infant seat. She was there and they just took over him. Then, we decided, "Well, we've got to go out." So, that night, I put on my nice dress and we went out to a nice restaurant and to the officers' club, because they danced all the time at the officers' club. Dancing was a big thing in those days. It was kind of fun to do. I had a babysitter, so, I had her take our picture, because I could remember our first night out. I was just so happy; we were both happy.

IL: About Paul, actually, because you had been pregnant and delivered while Bernie was still deployed, was that his first time meeting Paul in person, when he came home early? What was that like? Was that difficult, since he hadn't been there for so long?

SG: Well, Paul was in the infant seat, and I think Lisa kind of took him over. Paul sat there. I mean, he held him and everything, but he put him in an infant seat. She was jumping around, wanting to be in his lap and they bonded pretty quickly. Paul was four months old, I think--May, June, July, yes, four months old. So, that didn't take long. He bonded.

Even after Bernard came back to Tampa, I mean to MacDill, he had to go to the Avon Park Firing Range, which was in the middle of Florida. They had to practice aerial bombing and gunnery training. We took the kids with us. We stayed in a motel near Sebring.

The lady who ran the hotel was grandmotherly. She said, "Well, why don't you go out to this French restaurant out here and we'll watch the kids?" It was so wonderful. We were in the middle of nowhere. It was a beautiful French restaurant. So, I remember that, how neat it was. So, yes, it was fun.

SI: In general, how would you say the Air Force supported families in that era?

SG: Supported them? In what ways?

SI: In the everyday things you need. I've heard horror stories from other military wives. You're kind of dependent on making sure that the money is coming from your husband's account to your family account and, if something gets mixed up, that causes months' worth of issues. What about stuff like that, any bureaucratic problems you ran into or things where the Air Force seemed particularly helpful or supportive?

SG: Coming from the MacDill Air Force Base, which had been around for a long time, I realized, when I couldn't have a baby there, that those were the rules, that was it, too bad. I had to realize that "they knew best."

When I would go out to the grocery store, you just can't take your daughter with you. She's got to be tied in the basket. She can't get out unless she's in this fenced place right next-door. Well,

Lisa was sprightly, she liked to walk around--nope. When it came to personal things, like money or anything, I didn't have a struggle. So, what I can say is, as far as the five years that we were in, I don't remember having any problems with the Air Force itself.

IL: You had a diaper washing service at one point, right? I know you mentioned that that felt like quite the luxury. Were there any other accommodations?

SG: The diaper service was because of the wives that got together. We had a squadron wives' baby shower for the four of us. The gals gave us each a month of diaper service as a present. They all pitched in. The Commander's wife in Vietnam had four or five children. I admired her so much. It was the first time I got to see her house. My gosh, it was just [like a machine]--the older kids helped the younger kids. It was really nice.

I said to her (and I think I put this in the book), I said, "How do you do it? As a commander's wife, you had responsibilities that I didn't have, plus, with all these children and everything." She says, "Well, the younger they are, the easier it is. The older they are, the harder it is."

I thought about that years later, when I got home and there were the Vietnam protests and everything that was going on, "Hate the war," dah-dah-dah. I thought, "I'm glad my kids weren't adolescents," because they would come to me and say, "Why is Dad over there? Because, at school, they say he's a killer." They would question the whole thing. I see what she meant.

We had young children. Lisa was three, and I put her in preschool there. She had a lot of friends, that, to me, it was easier. Then, I had so much respect for the Commander's wife saying that.

IL: Did you experience any of that stigma, or any difficulties being an Air Force man's wife at the time? The Vietnam War is one of those first times in American history where we have the general public really against the war. Did you ever experience that in your own life, where people came and looked at you and said, "Your husband is a killer?" You talked about how the first time he had combat was so memorable, hurt you as much as it hurt him.

SG: The one thing that stands out would be, when he was gone, I spent one Christmas when he was in Okinawa with his parents and the next one, when he was in Vietnam, with his parents. Then, I went on to see my sister in New York for a week with the kids.

When I was in Chicago, where Bernard grew up, his folks went to a church that was within walking distance. That's where his parents met, because they had German services, too. So, I went with his mom and dad. They were very well-known in the church, his dad's an usher.

There were cameras all over. I thought, "What?" The Minister talked about (and it was all on TV), he was against the bombing of North Vietnam. It was all a political talk. I just felt like the size of a peanut, because it didn't seem that there were a lot of military people, families or wives like me, there or people that really knew of young men that were serving in Vietnam.

It [the war] hadn't grown that much. It was kind of at the beginning, the early years. So, I felt, "Hmm." Then, I learned that they were demonstrating, young people were demonstrating, on the street. They slept them in the basement of the Gieres' church; I felt uncomfortable. That's the only time I really felt that way, because we stayed at the Air Force base.

When Bernard came back, he had one more year to serve. So, we stayed in Tampa. He was a trainer on the F4 Phantom. Then, when he got out of the service, we came to New York, to Long Island, because he went with Pan Am. [We] didn't come in contact with a lot of the street riots and things like that that were going on. It was a tremulous time, though, with all the killings. I don't know--things just were really bad.

As far as being in the middle of it, I really wasn't. Oh, I did go to the university in 1969, after we moved to Long Island. We rented a house. He was flying for Pan Am. It was within a mile of the University at Stony Brook on Long Island. It was a big university. I decided to finish my education and that's where I started. Lisa had nursery school and I had somebody to watch Paul. My sister was two miles away. I would take the bus over and go to these classes.

That's where they would have protests. We were in one big, huge auditorium and they announced, "Everybody leave, go out on the street. There's a bomb threat." It was all done by students. I forgot--I don't think it was about Vietnam, because they were doing the same thing in France at the time. Maybe it was about Vietnam, but I was twenty-nine--I kind of felt like an old person. So, that's the only time I remember being so close to it, the younger kids, the college kids. So, anyway, that was my experience.

IL: That seemed like a pretty big change in your life. You moved to Long Island, but not just that, you went from growing up as a city girl to living on a farm, right?

SG: Well, yes, we rented [a place].

IL: How was that transition?

SG: Yes, that was different. That was fun. I am writing essays and I just wrote one called "The Mouse Chronicles, Number One." We had mice, because we lived near a farm. We moved out to further out on Long Island when Bernard went with the Air National Guard, which was moved from Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn out to Westhampton Beach.

We lived out there for over thirty years. That was a summer community, where we lived for a long time, because they had only two squadrons for rescue-and-recovery. One was New York Air National Guard and one was California. So, that's mainly where Bernard spent the rest of his flying time, when Pan Am would lay him off. He flew a lot with the Guard.

CB: Actually, I wanted to touch on that. You mentioned in the survey about the furloughs. You had also talked about what you described as "Flying's Golden Era." What was Flying's Golden Era and your experience being wed to a pilot during that time like?

SG: Well, are you talking about when he became a Pan Am pilot and got laid off? Is that what you're talking about? Then, he joined the Air National Guard at Floyd Bennett and flew the tanker, learned how to fly, had to go to school to learn how to fly that.

I believe they learned in Minnesota. So, he drove with Ron Rossi, a good friend who had been a TWA pilot and was laid off, too. So, they went up to learn how to fly in a KC-97 tanker. It's the same tanker that refueled them in Vietnam. They were the first squadron to fly from Florida to Vietnam, stopping in Hawaii, with the tanker and everything. So, he felt comfortable with it. It was a job. Then, they sent the whole unit out to Westhampton Beach and they changed from tankers to interceptors, F-102, a supersonic fighter-interceptor aircraft from the Cold War Era. Of course, Bernard loved it. [laughter] So, the base moved out at Westhampton Beach, F-102.

Years later, they changed to a rescue group, and they still are, today, rescue. He had to go to schooling for all of that. When he went with the airlines, he had to go to school for all the new aircraft. He learned to fly Air Buses and other kinds of aircraft after Pan Am went bankrupt and he went with Delta. So, he was always willing to learn. He would come home with a page that he took it out four lengths, like the length of a bed. It represented the cockpit. That's what he had to study at Delta and Pan Am.

My best friend, whom I mentioned before, Anne, she has four grandsons. Two of them have pilot's licenses, and they're young. One's a junior in high school. So, I was going through these things. I said, "I have these big cockpit pictures." So, I sent them to her. They live in Louisville. She had them framed and gave them to her grandson, who loves to fly. He framed them and hung them in his room.

IL: About Pan Am, it seems that, unfortunately, he was furloughed what ended up being three times. I admire Bernie's loyalty to the company throughout all that time. Did you consider it kind of a blessing in disguise, looking back at it, with the furloughs? I know that he was lost for some time, but he ended up finding some purpose in the New York National Air Guard and that became his eventual career. Looking back on it, how do you view those events?

SG: I think they were fortuitous. We didn't know at the time. I know a lot of airline pilots had other jobs. Some were builders, like Ronnie, who eventually built houses with Bernard. It was very fortuitous, because he said, once he was out, he didn't want to join the service again or stay in the service, because we were apart so much.

He felt that Vietnam would last or something else would come about and we'd be apart. So, he felt, though, when he got furloughed, he really had to get a job. Floyd Bennett Field sounded wonderful, so, he just went right in it. I did feel the times that he saved people's lives flying the C-130--once over in Europe--oh, it was wonderful.

He rose to the occasion and he was such a good commander and leader. He made lieutenant colonel, and then, colonel. He was colonel of the whole unit for a while, until Pan Am came back--but it was very satisfying to know that you have saved someone's life. Of course, they lost lives, too--they had a helicopter crash--but the basic tenant of it was, "I'm there," and it's right on

the shoulder pad, "to save lives." So, I think it was kind of a good thing. He would joke about Pan Am being the best job in the world.

We had no idea that these big airlines would furlough like that. So, that meant that he had a number at Pan Am. It's all seniority and it's [based on] your date of hire. So, when they furloughed him, they said, "We'll probably recall, but, if you give up your date of hire, you give up your number, you can't come back." That would mean he would go with United Airlines or something, or there was an Eastern Airlines then.

So, he kept his number and he did all these other things. It worked out well for him. Some fellows didn't. They would work for an insurance company or one guy managed a restaurant. His wife worked there. Being with the Guard was with the kind of people that we enjoyed being with, so, a lot of airline people, too, Air Force people.

SI: Did you find anything similar to the relationship you had with the Air Force wives, when you were on active duty, later on when Bernie was in the Air National Guard?

SG: Oh, between the local Guard and that?--no, because, for one thing, Guardsmen could have two faces. They could be a pilot for the C-130, but they could be the vice president of a bank in Connecticut at the same time. They came from all over to join the Guard. Because of that fact, everybody wasn't just on one stream, devoted to this.

Of course, there were quite a few devotees there, "weekend warriors," they were called; Bernie had some rewards and ribbons that he got from the State of New York. They were called to an Attica prison riot in Upstate New York, and they sent his Guard unit up there. I remember that.

When my son was in the same Guard unit that Bernie was in, he was a senior master sergeant fireman and went over to Kuwait and Iraq. They just sent the whole group, the whole fire [unit].

IL: While your husband was building his career in the Air National Guard in New York, you also had a change of pace, where you went back to college later in life and got your master's in education at Stony Brook. What made you decide to pursue further education in later life, graduate school, and then, why pursue teaching?

SG: Well, that's a good question, Ilona, because when we were living on the farm, Stony Brook instituted something called Empire State College. It was a branch of the university for people who worked and who couldn't go to the classroom at eight o'clock in the morning.

I had so many art credits. I wanted to get the BA degree out of the way, and then, I wanted to decide what to do. My college advisor sat down with me and said, "Look, have you ever thought of being a teacher?"

Because I had taught church school quite a bit when we moved to Long Island and did a lot of teaching voluntarily, she said, for Empire State College, I had to write essays and make an equivalency to that, to a regular paid job. I turned that in and I got credits for it.

My college advisor said, "You ever thought about being a teacher?" I said, "Well, I taught Sunday school. I did this, I did that." She said, "Well, I think you have enough art credits here to write to the state and get your art certification. You can even go further and get your degree in education." I said, "Well, yes, maybe that would be a good thing."

The first time Bernie got furloughed, I called the telephone company. I said, "I used to be a service rep and I want to go back to work," because I wanted to support Bernie in what he wanted to do. I didn't know they wouldn't accept me. It had changed so much. I was with Southwestern Bell and they were Northwestern Bell.

I thought, "Well, teaching is pretty steady. Maybe I could do that." So, my advisor looked at me and said, "Well, I think you would be a very good teacher. Why don't you experiment with it?" So, then, I got my BA degree quickly and went that route. I took her advice and I never really regretted it. Eventually, I earned a Master of Science Degree in Education.

CB: I saw you were involved in Greek life, Chi Omega. What was your experience like?

SG: Well, with a small college, they had, I think, four sororities and independents, which was like a sorority. It's a little bit different now, Coe College, because my grandson went there and my son did, too. I became a member of Chi Omega Sorority.

I'm a "groupie." I don't think I could have written the book without my writing group. I like to be around people that write, the people that have written, published--the same thing with [the] sorority. We liked to raise money. We did things together. We supported each other. So, that was the same way as the Chi Os were. We worked with a place where they had children that had disabilities. I enjoyed it.

CB: On your website, you said that your writing career began in earnest with the publication of an essay about your son and that kind of put you in contact with an editor. How did that experience motivate, affirm or influence your writing career?

SG: Well, it affirmed it, because I had joined a writing group in East Hampton which was run by Marijane Meaker, who was quite the publisher of young adult books. They were real professionals.

I became a reading teacher at Pulaski School in Riverhead, New York. I also ran the computer center, which was a brand-new thing in those days. So, this was in '82. Because I was surrounded by typewriters and computers, I would write during lunch hour.

My son had just come home from [SUNY] Brockport. He was a freshman. He loved motorcycles and he was a real boy. I wrote it as kind of a humorous essay, because we would read these at our writing group, beginning, middle and end.

I wrote about when Paul came home, and how he threw away all of his kid stuff in the garage, and the street signs he had stolen. He says, in other words, "I've grown up now. I don't need all this crap." I thought it was so funny. I put other things about him, that, for the first time, he

said, "Well, I want to eat fish." I said, "Fish? You never ate fish," but, when you go to college, you grow up.

I read it to the group in East Hampton and Marijane said, "Well, you've got to have this published." I didn't know how to publish or anything. They suggested that I send it to *The Christian Science Monitor*. Then, I got a copy of that magazine at the library and read it. They had their forum page where they always had people write-in stories or essays.

So, I sent it to them. In those days, you sent it all through the mail. They published it. I was so excited. I had four aides that worked for me in the computer center. I came back and I was so excited. I had no idea.

One of my aides took it, unbeknownst to me, and gave it to the principal. He let her put it on the local bulletin board. (I don't like to do that.) He called me in his office and he said, "Mrs. Giere," he said, "this is really fine that you did this, but," he said, "I want you to make me a promise." I said, "Okay." He says, "Don't ever write about me or this school." [laughter]

I said, "Well, sure, I won't write about you and this school." I could have written quite a piece, but I didn't. That was the first published piece, and then, a few other essays followed in the years to come. *The New York Times* published a couple things. So, I kept writing the essays and enjoyed that.

IL: From the essays obviously came the memoir, sort of a memorial or dedication to your husband. Then, it seems, from there, it snowballed into, now, you've written one about your mother's family and want to write one about your father's. What drove you to write the first memoir and what keeps encouraging you to delve into your past, to recount all these stories of your family history?

SG: That's really a good story. I want to show you this. This is the book that I wrote about my mother's family. The reason I wrote it was because I was in Minneapolis visiting one of my aunts who was dying in hospice. This was in the early '90s.

I realized that the historical society had all my Grandfather Nolan's papers and memorabilia. When he passed away, his second wife didn't know what to do with it. She just gave it away, all his papers. My mother had fabulous stories she told me about her life. So, this is what I did on a site called Blurb.com, B-L-U-R-B. You ever seen it on the Internet? So, they actually own the book. They sell it, and it's on Amazon. You can find it, but they want over a hundred dollars for it now.

My publisher said that if I can take this and wean it down to something like my book *My Pilot*, they'll publish it, but, right now, I'm working on the Missouri one. I put a lot of money into my Nolan book and sent a copy to all my cousins. It was such a big family. I just wanted to leave a legacy and let people know who their grandfather was.

Letters are just diamonds in the rough. Unless you bring it to life and dramatize it and tell it, there are no memories. They're just in drawers or boxes or something at historical societies.

IL: We live in a digital world now, where text messages have replaced letters. I don't really have such fond recollections of sending letters between friends, but that's what kind of built your story, right? Your memoirs, a lot of them are based on letters, even this one now. What meaning have these letters taken on for you? Have they taken on a life of their own? Do they add another dimension to your writing?

SG: Oh, of course, a big dimension. They bring the characters to life, when you see something that is so different that you can't believe, like my grandfather being a poet. My dad, I found a little tiny booklet of my dad's that [revealed] my dad was a staff member in the early '30s for Dewey Short, who was running for Congress from Missouri, running again.

[Editor's Note: Dewey Jackson Short (1898-1979) represented Missouri's 14th District in the US House of Representatives from 1929 to 1931 and the Seventh District from 1935 to 1957.]

He went down--he was in his mid-twenties--and he drove all through the southern part of Missouri and would go to these towns during Prohibition and wrote. "They let the beer flow." He was a politician, my dad. Then, he said, in one note, "I have to go up to my room and finish my poem for Patty." That was my mother. I thought, "You wrote poetry?" So, it's a real discovery.

I'm reading letters now that my grandmother wrote from the Depression era. It really comes home, really comes home to you, very prescient and a lot of connections with today. I see hard times.

CB: When you were writing this book and *My Pilot*, when you were going through these letters and memories, was it ever difficult or painful to recall some of those things? Were there ever times when you got joy from it? What was that process like?

SG: It's an emotional journey. My father had three sisters. I'll just tell you real quickly--the oldest one, who was divorced and had two boys in World War II, went to her sister's (younger sister by four years) when her younger sister was dying of breast cancer. This was in '57 and this was Pearl. I had been invited to Pearl's and I loved that, my aunt and her husband, in Tulsa for every summer.

My Aunt Burleigh was--I call her a closet writer. She had little journal pages and she wrote the most beautiful account of her sister's last days. I could just picture the whole thing, as if I were making a movie of it.

I think that kind tears at your emotions--you can't help it. I was in high school. I didn't know my Aunt Pearl was dying of cancer. Nobody told me. Breast cancer was, "What?" So, now, I appreciate everything, that her older sister sat down and wrote her feelings about it and how Pearl wanted her to put up the Christmas [decorations]. She wanted her to do it, because everything should be like it was. So, yes, it is very emotional to go through the letters.

CB: In the same vein, in the author's note to *My Pilot*, you described it as "a work of creative nonfiction." Could you talk a little bit about what that means to you and why you chose to write it that way?

SG: Well, you could call it a "portrait memoir," but it really becomes a portrait of both of us, because, in order to tell his story, I have to tell my story and the connection between us. That's why I'm trying to establish myself in this new project that I'm doing. You get close to the person through the writing.

To me, writing *My Pilot* was just a love story, my love story to Bernard, just the two of us. Of course, there were other characters, but it expands. There's so many different facets of memoir. It's really, really amazing. I'm working on the portrait memoir right now.

IL: It seems clear, throughout this wonderful chat with you, that family is something you deeply treasure and value. You've invested a lot of time in honoring their memory. If you feel comfortable sharing, would you mind discussing how your family came together when Bernie's ALS was diagnosed? I know you guys were under the presumption that it was a herniated disc for a long time, and then, slowly coming to the realization that his time in the military may have contributed to his ALS, just kind of talking us through it.

SG: My family all knew about Bernard's bad back and would mention something. His walking pattern was not normal, but plodding. At one time, Lisa's mother-in-law came up from Florida. They had a place at the Shore. Bernard was walking out and she said, "He doesn't walk right, like he used to," just out of the blue.

A good friend of my daughter's came from a large family. One of her sisters was a very well-known pulmonologist at the Hospital for Special Surgery, Dr. Doreen J. Addrizzo-Harris. Bernard, at the same time, was having trouble breathing sometimes, not all the time, because ALS can strike the limbs, the legs, first, or it can strike up here, with the breathing. Now, it was moving up to the breathing.

Bernie went to see Dr. Addrizzo. Her father was a famous heart surgeon. And then, she sent Bernard to Dr. [Dale J.] Lange, who was a specialist in ALS, a neurologist. We didn't know.

The visits took nine months, at least. It's a long diagnosis for the disease. You just don't know, but, if it hadn't been for my daughter edging me on, "Come on, Dad, come on, come on, Mom," then, knowing about Doreen, the pulmonologist--so, through my daughter's assurance and the family support--we had help. I don't know if I could've gone through it without them, because I knew nobody with ALS except Lou Gehrig. I think it was Gary Cooper that played him in the movie.

That's how it happened, because our family came together and was very supportive. Once it was diagnosed--then, we were on another plateau--it was the hardest thing in the world for him to tell people. We all knew it.

Of course, the kids lived on Long Island. They could come in two hours. My son lived there at the time with his family. We'd all get together at our house in Remsenburg. We had a big house with a pool. Dad, he would just sit there. The kids noticed everything (and were very supportive), realizing that, yes, Dad couldn't use a fork and a spoon. I had to make a special wrapping around each, so [that] he could grasp it. Seeing a strong person fade like this saddened us all.

However, we did take Bernie's dad in with us for seven years, until he was 101. Then, he died at 102, but we saw him go down from ninety-three all the way. The kids witnessed it. He ended up in a wheelchair, pretty strong guy. So, that's just the fate of what happened.

Lisa was with me that horrible night. Bernard had decided to go for something new. It was a pacemaker, a diaphragm pacing system. Through a great organization, ALS Ride For Life, we met this wonderful, well-known chef on the North Shore of Long Island who had ALS. He was in his fifties or forties. He had this and he loved it.

Bernard thought, "I might want to do that." So, he went to the hospital. They said, "Yes, you could do it."

When Bernard came out of the bedroom, after having the surgery, and said, "It hurts so bad. I can't stand it." So, Lisa and I took him to the hospital and he never came out. Lisa and I got a room in a hotel nearby. We lived there for five days, hoping for the best.

Bernie had blood clots coming up his leg to his lungs, which I never thought of, but we went through that together, making the decision. Because it's a teaching hospital, Stony Brook Hospital, the young surgeons were from all over the world. They got us out in the hall and tried to tell us, "We can take him into the operating room. We can do this and we can do that." This meant he would have to have a breathing tube in addition to his feeding tube. Even at home, when the therapist would put this mask on him and tell him to breathe, he hated it. I said, "Honey, you had masks in jet planes your whole life," but he couldn't stand it.

So, then, we had made that decision just not to do it, to let him go naturally and not let him suffer. The nurse came out of her office, which was across from his room, and she got me aside. She was from St. Louis. She said, "I just want you to know, I heard what was going on. You did the right thing. I admire you."

Then, it was finding how to get his body to the place where they were using cadavers to solve ALS at a research place. I had to do all that, but we did it. So, now, they're coming out feeling that it has to do with a gene, a gene that causes a certain kind of dementia, frontal dementia, and ALS, when the gene is corrupted. I think they call it corrupted or whatever.

My daughter and I went back to the hotel and that was it. It's very tough. It's very tough to make that decision, but I have to make the decision according to what the person wanted and the person that you know. Having gone through [it] with his mother on a machine, he and his father decided that she could go naturally. So, I knew that's what he wanted.

IL: Thank you for sharing that. I know it must be very difficult.

SG: Well, it hits the heart, yes, but I think it is a part of life. I could write a book about those five days in the hospital, really could.

IL: After Bernie's death, you kind of started almost a resurrection of self, after so many years of being an Air Force man's wife. I know you dedicated a chapter to widowhood, where you had moved to New Jersey and started from scratch, a new home, new furniture. So, was that a surreal experience for you? Did you kind of rediscover your independence? Was it a lot of--I know you said in the book--looking at all the different places in your home and not being able to decide where Bernie's favorite would be? He'd never seen it

SG: Yes. In a way, I was glad he never saw it, because everything in this house has been decided by me. That's never happened in my life, because, once we were married young, he always had a voice in the color of our carpet, for instance. Some men don't do that, but he did. So, we had to discuss everything and make sure it satisfied us to a certain degree. On my own, I make a lot of mistakes, but they're my mistakes.

I moved to New Jersey to be closer to my daughter and her family. I was two hours from my son at the time. Paul died in 2020. My daughter-in-law still is on Long Island with the three children. Now, the middle one, Ryan, he's out in Madison, Wisconsin. Paul's oldest daughter is now a lawyer. She had just started in law school when he died.

Yes, I feel I'm very blessed. There were twenty-eight of us last Thanksgiving. My daughter is kind of the hub. They moved to Denville and adopted twin boys when her two girls were in high school. So, she has two eighteen-year-old boys and two grandchildren. [laughter] I enjoy being around them all.

I don't know, I think God has been good to me. He's given me another life and I'm trying to make the most of it. There's a lot I want to do. I want to finish this book. I started writing about Bernie's parents, wonderful parents, in Germany, growing up in Germany. So, I want to write some short pieces about them. His dad's stories, are unbelievable.

I'm now writing about my dad's family. There's just a lot to pass down, and I know because I've been the receiver of wonderful memorabilia and letters and things, diaries. So many people have come up to me and said, "But, I never knew my grandparents," or, "I never talked to my grandfather about the war." So, I feel I'm doing this for my seven grandchildren and whoever comes after them.

I'm happy I'm doing it. It's more than I could buy in a store. If I die and leave three boxes full of this stuff, they're old scrapbooks and they wouldn't know the dates on them or who these people were, but, now, they do, especially in this big book that I wrote about my mother. There's so many people involved. So, yes, it's given me a reason to go forward.

SI: Ilona, Carmen, do you have any other questions?

CB: I just wanted to ask about your painting. On your website, you said that you had been featured in some galleries around Long Island. What's that been like, taking up painting again and being able to show your work?

SG: Well, I got into painting at my retirement place, which is called Cranes Mill, because they have an art gallery here. They have two hallways full of art. When I walked in with my daughter to find a place to live, I said, "I want my own cottage and I will love this art gallery."

Well, the woman who was running it asked me to take over, because she was growing older, in a wheelchair, and she couldn't do it. I said, "I'll do it with a partner." So, I spent the first three or four years, until I started working on this book, dealing with artists from all over New Jersey. There's so many art groups out here, it's fabulous. I would go up to Art Hill at night and I would do drawings. They had a model and everything.

Writing just took over; I couldn't do it all. I had breast cancer and a mastectomy in 2018. I had a car accident three months later. I said to my partner, "I want to finish this book. I can't do the art gallery," all those essays every month and helping them out with hanging their pictures and partying. She said, "That's okay. I'll do it." She took it over.

So, I'm not doing art now, but my oldest granddaughter's son is an art teacher. I get a big kick out of dealing with him, talking to him. He does so many wonderful things in his classroom.

That's what I do. I tried painting when I first came here, in my kitchen, which looks out over the pond. It's a big slider, but I just couldn't do it, plus writing the essays, plus going to my writing group. I find that--you'll learn this from many people that are older than you--as you get older, the days grow shorter, never enough time. [laughter]

So, I don't paint anymore, but I still enjoy it. I've been to so many of the big museums; never been to the Prado. Bernard always said, "Got to go to Spain and go to the Prado," but I love art. I love it. Especially Western art. I like writing about artists.

I used to do a lot of writing about the artists, but memoir writing's kind of taken over. So, it's another occupation where you can lose yourself and you can look up and say, "Oh, I've been doing this for four hours?" So, that's what I'm doing right now, but I really appreciated talking about everything.

SI: Yes. Is there anything we missed, anything you want to talk about before we conclude that we didn't bring up?

SG: No, because I've been on so many interviews, with a publicist, throughout the country, through podcasts and the radio. Very few of them have read my book. Some of them have, and it makes a big difference

IL: Actually, if we have a few minutes, if you don't mind, I did want to hear about "Mr. X," and then, your later, scandalous neighbor, how you were a part-time housewife, a part-time sales rep and a part-time undercover spy agent. Do you mind sharing the behind-the-scenes details that

weren't revealed in your book about what that was like, being part of not one, but two operations?

SG: Well, yes, I'll chat a little bit with you. In the book, I told the truth, but not all the truth. "Mr. X" was a Cuban and, at that time, there were a lot of Cubans in Florida. The [October 1962 Cuban] Missile Crisis hadn't happened. Drugs were a big part of it. I didn't know anything about drugs. I still don't know that much about them. My neighbor was a professional burglar.

The problem across the street, as you recall, there was a couple across the street, they had--who I didn't tell about--a little boy and girl who were friendly with my daughter, Lisa. My daughter was two or three and they were like three and six or three and five. My neighbor was pregnant with the third one. The husband was in Cam Rahn Bay, [Vietnam]. He was a sergeant.

I knew something was wrong with the family, with her being there by herself. So, I hope this interview isn't going any further, this little end piece, is it?

SI: Do you want us to turn the recorder off?

SG: Well, no, but I don't want you to show it to anybody, because that's why I didn't tell that about this family. I just made it up that there was the baby. Well, there was more than the baby. I would play with the kids in the family room and little Russell and the little girl, Debbie, were there. I could see, at night, a car come to the house and come back.

So, I said, "Oh." I said, "Oh, is your uncle visiting you? Do you have an uncle or brother?" Oh, she tells about this man that comes and sleeps in bed with them, the mommy and the kids, horrible things like that. I would tell Bernard, I would write to Bernard, "Oh, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

Then, I went and I started paying a lot of attention to the baby. I went there on purpose. The poor, little thing was not real healthy looking. She drank, the mom. I thought, "Oh, what am I going to do?"

So, in the book, that's what I said--I went to [the base], told somebody there, a lawyer or social worker, and they handled it. He did come home and they did break up the family. This was the month after Bernard came back, a couple months. We stayed a year while [Bernard] was an instructor pilot.

The people next-door were in their own cocoon. It was just kind of shocking for me, but I just felt no danger, honestly. I just didn't feel--I felt, "Well, I'm going to spy on him. I don't care."

I liked the guy from the police, [the] sergeant. Bernard would meet him in clandestine 7-11s and give him notes and everything. I thought it was kind of exciting, really. So, it all turned out well. Yes, the kids were rescued.

We moved. Years later, my son-in-law's parents moved from Massapequa Park down to Tampa. They drove by my old house and it is not kept up well. It looks very sad. The neighborhood has

gone down and I'm very sad to hear it, nice little neighborhood of ranch houses. The lady next to me had a pool, very nice.

So, that's the story of my little clandestine spying. In writing *My Pilot*, I said to my editor, I said, "I just don't know how to say this." So, I called him "Mr. X." In fact, I don't even remember his name when I started the book.

He had another wife (cover) and baby on the other side of town. He would leave the house in a beautiful suit, dressed to the nines, with a briefcase, like a lawyer, get on a plane and go to Miami and rob places and come back. He was a gangster. What can you say? So, there I was.

In fact, one of my writer friends on Long Island, in East Hampton, asked me--I went up to Breadloaf, which is a writer's conference. The gal I worked with was Nancy Willard. I wrote the story of Bernard going that night, at the Flight Line Café, going to Vietnam--she said, "Please make this a novel, make this fiction. Oh, you could do this."

So, I did play around with it a little bit. When you have that stretch, when you're a writer, you can make anything happen for the woman that's on her own and things happen around her, but fiction wasn't for me.

IL: It almost seems like a fiction novel. Your husband leaves and, all of a sudden, the FBI come to your door. You become an undercover spy--housewife by day, FBI by night.

SG: I can remember just sitting there and thinking, "Holy cow, FBI." Well, of course, I had those two weeks of Christmas up with [my sister]. After Chicago, I went to New York with my sister. Her husband was a New York City policeman. He was a police lieutenant. I talked everything over with him. So, I'd call him and ask him what he thought. He was pretty good, and gave me advice.

So, he just passed away, at almost a hundred, during Covid, but he was a big help for me, because, at first, I don't think I really trusted the police. The sergeant knew what he was doing, because he saw Bernard's credentials, and I guess the police work with other people in the service. I guess they felt we were okay and I felt he was all right.

SI: Thank you. We really appreciate all your time today. The book is fascinating. We hope to see more of your writing in the future.

SG: Carmen and Ilona, they were really good.

IL: It was such a pleasure meeting you, thank you.

SI: Wonderful job.

SG: Pleasure meeting you, really nice.

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

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/6/2024
Reviewed by Sarajane Giere 9/20/2024