

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH LITA B. SALDARINI

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

MARCH 27, 2000

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mrs. Lita Saldarini on March 27, 2000 with Shaun Illingworth and ...

Sean Harvey: Sean Harvey.

SI: Mrs. Saldarini, we'd like to thank you for joining us and allowing us to interview you.

Lita Saldarini: My pleasure to be here.

SI: We'd like to begin by asking you a little bit about your parents, starting with your father. Could you tell us about his background?

LS: Well, both my parents were born in Italy. My father came from a small farming community near Asti in Italy, which is in the north, wine producing, and that's what their farm was. They had vineyards. At a very early age, he immigrated to Argentina with his grandfather. I know very little of that history, except for the fact that he did do that at an early age. He had a brother and a sister who were living in Buenos Aires and were in business, so that was their reason for going there, because he came from a large family. There were six or seven [children], and the vineyards didn't really produce enough income to support a large family, so several of them left home at an early age to earn a living. He subsequently decided that he wanted to come to the United States and arrived in New York sometime before World War I, I believe. My mother, on the other hand, came from Turin. She came over in 1920. This was after the war. Conditions in Turin and in Italy, generally, during World War I were pretty terrible. She was not happy at home, so at age nineteen, she decided that she wanted to come to the United States, because she was a very progressive person. Although she did not have too much education beyond grammar school, the family was always well read, and they had a lot of ambition and energy. She was basically extremely intelligent. So at nineteen, she set sail for New York and never wanted to go back to Italy. She lived in New York or the New York area all of her life. She loved New York. It certainly presented a lot of opportunities for self-education. ... Her sister was a very good seamstress. My mother was also in that line, and she did go to work in the garment center in New York City upon her arrival. She went to night school immediately and learned English, and she always said that the *Daily News* was her great teacher because of the pictures and she could read the captions ... and she became very fluent in English. My father, on the other hand, was a baker in Italian bakeries and worked with other Italians, so he never mastered English to any great degree. ... They married in New York in 1924. I was born in 1926, and before my brother was born in 1928, they moved to Union City, New Jersey, which was where many people that they knew lived. ... That's where I grew up, went through grammar school until ... just before the war, 1940, World War II, now, and I graduated in 1940. ... At that time, since it was wartime, it was the end of the Depression, which for my family was a very difficult period, although we never wanted for very much. There wasn't too much thought that both my brother and I could go to college, so it was decided that it was more important for him to do it, and I was perfectly agreeable to that. ... I decided, in fact, in high school, I had taken a commercial course, because I had no thought of going to college, and, I guess, at that time, the careers that my friends and I thought were most open to us was either being a schoolteacher or a secretary. ... So I chose the business world.

SI: Going back a little bit, your father's original bakery, was that in New York?

LS: Yes, he worked in the bakeries in New York, downtown.

SI: Did he ever talk about that neighborhood? Was it an Italian neighborhood?

LS: Yes, it was. Bleeker Street, MacDougal Street were [in Italian neighborhoods]. In fact, that's where he lived when he arrived in New York and had friends there, and since he had been a baker also in Buenos Aires, he continued that when he came to New York.

SI: As a child, would you ever go back with your family to New York to visit?

LS: Oh, yes, my mother was, we were always New Yorkers basically, and she would take us. Union City was very convenient to New York. We were right across the river, as Joe mentioned, so she would go in very often, take both my brother and I either to Radio City for a children's movie, to Macy's or Klein's on Union Square for clothing and Nedick's for orange soda and a hot dog.

SH: What was it like as a small child growing up in Greenwich Village?

LS: Well, I didn't grow up in Greenwich Village. I was born on the Upper East Side and we moved to Union City when I was one year old. ... When my parents married, they had an apartment on the Upper East Side on 101st Street and about 2nd Avenue, so I never grew up in New York until we moved back to New York when I was already in high school.

SI: What was it like growing up in Union City? What was your neighborhood like?

LS: Oh, it was a very clean, middle class area. Actually, I grew up not too far from where Joe grew up, although we didn't know each other in those days. But it was basically Swiss, German, Italian neighborhood, sort of blue-collar, but very pleasant. ... We had our own little home.

SI: I'm going to ask you the same question I asked your husband. Did you maintain any traditions in your family from Italy, like food or customs?

LS: Well, yes, certainly cooking. Customs, not so much. I don't know that people from northern Italy were very different from Americans. They were not particularly religious. We also were Roman Catholic, but people in northern Italy were more of a socialist-bent than a church-bent society, so there were not too many traditional [customs] except for the normal Christmas and Easter, that kind of thing.

SI: Saint Joseph's Day on March 19th.

LS: Yes. Well, that's to the Italians like Saint Patrick is to the Irish, so there was always a special zeppole my mother made as a dessert, but that's about all.

SI: Did your family, on either side, maintain any ties in Italy?

LS: Yes, yes, both my mother and my father were the only ones in their respective families who immigrated to this country ... so I never knew any of my aunts or uncles or grandparents, never met them.

SI: Would they send letters back and forth?

LS: Yes, they would, but the mails were rather erratic. Sometimes they would write, sometimes they wouldn't, sometimes you would get the mail, and sometimes you wouldn't. Correspondence was pretty erratic and slow as it came by ship.

SI: Were they interested in following the news in Italy and what was current there in the '20s and '30s?

LS: Not particularly, no. No, my father had gone back at one time, I know, before he was married, before he married my mother. That was after he left South America. ... That must have been an interesting experience, because at that time, it was about 1924, the Fascists were already in power. When he went back to his small village and he saw what was going on, the few Fascists were very arrogant young men, and he just didn't like the whole atmosphere. It was very, it was not nice, so he decided he didn't want any part of that, didn't want to get involved with being a Fascist or, you know, being conscripted into some kind of army, so he came back to the [United States].

SH: So your parents really felt there was nothing to hold on to.

LS: That's right. No, my mother was happy when she left Italy. She swore she would never go back, didn't go back until 1959 with me. No, she always loved the freedom of this country and very different life. ... She loved New York, because you could be yourself, be anonymous, and there was no, you know, no small town gossip and people minding your business. Everybody minded their own business. She was a very independent person, so she liked life here.

SI: Did she work after your parents got married?

LS: No, she did not. She was an excellent homemaker and cook; made her own and my clothes.

SI: Given how you said she was independent, did she have any political leanings or any causes that she was interested in?

LS: No, no, she did not get involved in community affairs. However, she was a great admirer of Roosevelt. She felt that he did a lot for poor people. Eleanor Roosevelt was also a person she admired. From '24 to '29, the economy was booming, as it is today. ... Then when the crash on Wall Street occurred we were already in Union City, and she, I always remember, she said my father came home and said, "Oh, there was a crash on Wall Street," or, "Wall Street crashed," or something, and it didn't really register with her what it meant. She said, "Well, we own our house and we have a little bank account," and it didn't affect them at all, but, of course, it really did, because the economy then took a downturn and the Depression years were difficult.

SI: Do you remember as a child the effects in terms of the Depression? A lot of people mentioned that hobos would come through town and knock on people's doors asking for food.

LS: There were a lot of door-to-door salesmen, I remember that, which is something that for a man was certainly someone who didn't have a job and they were, they would sell magazine subscriptions, Fuller brushes, vacuum cleaners, so that kind of thing was very prevalent. People were, it was difficult to earn a living. In a small town like Union City, it wasn't so noticeable as it would have been if we had been in Manhattan, where, I understand, people were sleeping on the Riverside Drive in the park, and so forth. There were shanties. But we were not, you know, we were not exposed to that, and we were even not so much, as children, in touch with the news, because you got the news on the radio. We went to a movie once in a blue moon and there, you know, you had the newsreels, but you didn't have television, so your only source of information was the radio and the newspapers, which in our family continued to be the *Daily News*.

SH: You mentioned that your mother really liked Roosevelt a lot.

LS: Yes.

SH: Did your family openly talk about politics in the house, or was it more of something you found out later?

LS: Probably found out more later, because in my household my father worked at night because the bakeries worked at night, so he would be, he would go off at night, we saw him for breakfast, then he would be sleeping for most of the day. So really dinner time was about the only time that we got together, so there was not an awful lot of political discussion between my parents, or I was not aware of it.

SI: Did you notice that the New Deal programs had any effect on either your life or your neighborhood in terms of programs such as the WPA?

LS: Oh, yes, I was aware of WPA. People in town, there were a lot of ditch-diggers and so forth, and late in the '30s, my father was disabled and I know that my mother tried to then go out and find some work and that was impossible, the doors were closed and it was very difficult. Many people were on relief, as welfare was called in those days. My mother was always proud of the fact that she never went on relief. When we moved to New York in 1940, my parents managed a building on 22nd Street owned by the Baker's Union, of which my father was a member.

SI: What would you do for entertainment and fun in grammar school and high school?

LS: Well, I did have a brother, and we were very close in age; we were only fifteen months apart, so we had mutual friends. I guess what the kids did was roller-skate down to the local park. We played stickball in a small alleyway behind our home. We'd go to a movie occasionally, but very occasionally, because I think they were ten cents, and ten cents was not money that my mother threw around too easily. In fact, I don't think she went to a movie that

whole time. We had friends and we would sit in our backyard. My father had built sort of a gazebo, and, you know, our little friends would gather there. We would talk, play games. My mother insisted that I learn how to embroider, which I did very, very reluctantly, and then I was able to play, but I had to sew or something or other. She thought that was something that every girl should do, but, to this day I do not sew very well. I was in high school during the war years in New York. I might go to the Paramount with a friend. We were the so-called “bobby-soxers.” We grew up in the big band era.

SI: Did your mother, particularly your mother, ever take you to the World’s Fair in New York?

LS: Well, at that time, my father was already ill; he had been hospitalized. So she did have a cousin who lived in Flushing, not too far from the Fair, and she sent us over there. We stayed there with them, and my cousin, who was maybe sixteen at the time, would take my brother and I to the Fair. My mother or my father never got there. My brother was only eleven, I was twelve.

SI: Did you have any particular reaction to it? Was it exciting?

LS: Oh, we thought it was wonderful, yes. I remember the main buildings, the Trylon and Perisphere, (the globe), which I guess still exists, I’m not sure. I remember we would go on few of the rides and some of the buildings. It was quite spectacular. Oh, I remember the General Motors exhibit. Many, many years later I went to work for General Motors, so I always remembered that [as] my introduction many years before. I never thought I’d wind up working for that company. I remember the GE exhibits; some of those exhibits were quite futuristic. In fact, I don’t think that the GM exhibits of the elevated, self-propelled cars really ever, ... they keep talking about it, but it is still a new technology. We also enjoyed the foreign nations pavilions.

SI: Would you say that was the farthest you ever really traveled before high school?

LS: Yes, we did not travel very far. New York was about the border. ... The family would go into New York and take the subway down to Coney Island. That was about the farthest that we would go. That was an all day project.

SH: Did your family have a car?

LS: No, we never had a car until my brother was old enough to drive.

SH: What was public transportation like back then?

LS: Well, it was good. There were trolley cars, both in Union City and New York, which were wonderful. I don’t think there were many busses. The trolleys were the local transportation down to the ferry and across. For two cents, you had a beautiful ferry ride right across the river, so we didn’t feel any particular need for a car, nor could we afford one. In the ‘30s, there was only one car owner on our block.

SI: In the late 1930s and even early 1940s, do you remember hearing any news about what was going on in Europe or even in Asia?

LS: Oh, yes, sure. When, in fact, when I graduated from grammar school, which was 1940, the war was raging in Europe, and that was one reason why we, myself and my friends, probably decided we would go to work. We were not even thinking about college until the war was over. In fact, I had taken a commercial course, which, thinking back, I regret, even to this day, because then when I had the opportunity during the war period when money was more plentiful and my parents said, "You know you should really go to college, you can go if you want to." "Oh," I thought, "I have to make up these credits. I hadn't taken the proper courses," and I liked what I was doing, so I put it off and I never graduated from college. I did take some courses at City College and Hunter College, also, Katherine Gibbs Business School, but they were mostly business courses.

SI: What did your commercial course consist of?

LS: Well, bookkeeping, stenography and the usual, then history and English, some math, and all the rest. I guess the emphasis was on the typewriters and stenography, that kind of thing, business law.

SI: Was it a mix of men and women in this course? Would you say it was more men or more women?

LS: Well, no. This was a regular high school class. Most of the girls, I guess, did take the steno and typing. I don't know what the men took. They probably had more mechanical drawing and things like that.

SI: Do you remember when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

LS: Oh, yes, we were living in New York then, at the time, and I do recall that it was a Sunday and the announcement. I guess we had the radio on, and we did hear President Roosevelt saying, "This day will live in infamy," and so forth. Yes, I do remember that day very clearly.

SI: Did you and your family have any idea what the implication was, especially since you had a young boy in the family?

LS: Well, my brother was younger than I, so there wasn't too much fear that he would be drafted or have to go into the Army, so that was fortunate. ... Well, I suppose my parents certainly felt the implication, that we lost all contact with our relatives in Europe at that time. As a matter of fact, my grandfather died at some point during the war, but my mother was never aware of it until mails resumed after the war. ... Then some of the hardships started sinking in. We had rationing and coupons and that kind of thing. There was some deprivation there, but then there was more money around and life was not as difficult in New York during the war as it had been during the Depression.

SH: How did your family's view of the war change because of their background, considering that their relatives were now the enemy?

LS: Well, they were never patriotic insofar as being Italian was concerned. So they would, no, in fact, I'd have to say they were critical of the Fascist regime and Mussolini in particular, so there was ... no feeling on that side.

SI: As the war started moving forward and you were still in high school, did you have to work in between classes or after school?

LS: No, I never did. Again, there were not that many opportunities, well, some of my friends maybe worked in the Woolworth's Five and Dime, but my mother never wanted me to do that. So, no, I never worked while I was in school. Anyone under sixteen had to apply for working papers in order to be hired for anything.

SI: Were you involved in any kind of scrap drives? Do you remember these sorts of things, scrap drives or bond drives?

LS: Yes, I remember them, but, I was not involved. I think I really became more aware of everything when I graduated high school and then went immediately to work at Columbia for the Manhattan Project.

SI: I guess we'd like to move into that now. How did you become aware first that there was this kind of opportunity?

LS: The recruiters from the Manhattan Project or the government came to the high schools to the senior classes and were interviewing students who ... would be interested in working at Columbia, the Manhattan Project. So a friend of mine and I decided we would like that, and we went up to Columbia to the physics laboratory. ... I was not quite eighteen, and we were interviewed by a couple of the physics professors and I remember I thought, "Oh, this looks like it's going to be really dull." Yes, they were really tweedy, sort of typical professors you see in the movies, and I thought, "I don't think I'd like this at all." ... It was all these chemical things and I had done stenography more in the business area, so I thought, "No, I don't think I like this." So I wound up working in the receiving department, which was receiving all of the materials for the physics laboratory, which, of course, at the time, I didn't know really what was going on, and they were building this reactor, or they were doing a lot of the experiments in the basement. ... Of course, I didn't know all of that was happening down there. In hindsight, I wish I had stayed with the professors. It would have been more interesting. I just knew I was helping in the war effort. "Rosie the Riveter" was a popular poster; women were entering the work force, filling in while men were in the service.

SI: What did the recruiters initially tell you? Did they tell you that you would be doing stenography?

LS: I think they probably said they were looking for secretarial-typists, probably more typing than stenography, but a little bit of both. ... They had various openings in departments,

including the receiving department, and that's why I had opted for that, because there were other young people working there, so I felt like I was with other people my age.

SI: Did anybody from your high school go with you?

LS: The girl who came with me for the interview, I don't believe stayed. She went elsewhere.

SH: What was the initial attraction for you to stay? You said that it didn't seem like in the beginning that you'd be interested, but you did stay.

LS: Well, I liked the atmosphere at Columbia. It's a beautiful university, it was just pleasant, it was an easy subway commute from where I lived, and I enjoyed the people that I was with. I didn't have too many specific plans at that time. I was just working to make some money and have some fun.

SI: What did your parents think of this?

LS: Well, as I said at one point, when my mother felt that there was enough money that I should go to school, to college, I indicated I was not interested. I liked what I was doing. I satisfied her by enrolling in some night classes at Hunter.

SI: When you were initially pulled in, did they just say that you were going to be working for Columbia, or did they say you were working for the Manhattan Project?

LS: We knew it was the Manhattan Project. We knew it was a government project in the university. Yes, I was aware of that and I know we had identification badges and so forth. There was security going in and out of the building. It was very nice. We'd go across the street and have lunch at Teacher's College, which is a beautiful facility, and it was just a very pleasant time. At that time, they had the naval, I forget what they called them, the "ninety-day wonders" probably; officer's training. So one day I remember I saw a young man I had been in high school with and he was in his Navy uniform and he really looked spectacular. So they were around the campus; it was interesting to see them. We didn't have anything to do with them, but it was just nice.

SH: Did you ever have any idea during that time what the project was, or were you just in receiving?

LS: No, no. You know, when I think of the materials that came in, Geiger counters and things like that, Keffel and Esser were the big suppliers, Allied Chemical, all kinds of things, I had no idea what that was all about. As I said, I think they recruited us right from high school because we were too naïve to even think about finding out what was going on.

SH: Guaranteed automatic secrecy.

LS: Yes, absolutely. [laughter] They didn't have to seal my lips. Actually, the Manhattan Project was one of the top secrets of the war. I would learn later that the work was broken down

so that the people working on it only knew their phase of it and were unaware of the objective. There were vaults deep under the Pupin Physics Laboratory where a cyclotron was built and experiments in smashing the atom were conducted. The entire building was out of bounds to anyone not connected with the project. Obviously, we could not have known anything of that and we would have been terrified to know we could all be blown to smithereens. In our section, we mostly typed up orders for the materials; I don't recall who collected them, but I remember a man who had a desk and his own secretary who sat a little apart from the rest of us. He never said very much, but he was on the phone a lot and also out of the office. I believe he was the government liaison who had direct dealings with the physicists. We were told not to talk to anyone about anything we saw or heard, and I certainly would have taken that seriously. It was wartime and we knew anything concerned with an Army project was "classified" - those words were undoubtedly clearly marked on everything we did.

SH: Was it after you graduated that they recruited you, or was it before?

LS: Yes, well, just before. When I graduated in February of '44, I probably went right to work the following month, maybe March or April of '44, and was there until the news came out about the dropping of the atom bomb, Hiroshima on August 6, Nagasaki a few days later.

SH: Did you make the connection at that point or ...

LS: Oh, yes, then, you know, we were made aware of what had been going on. At that point, actually, what happened somewhere along the line is that Union Carbide and Carbon took over the project, and we were moved off the campus, the Pupin Laboratory, up to 132nd Street, which at that time was one subway stop up the line, and into what had been, in fact, we called it the Nash Building because it had been a car warehouse, maybe a parts place, so that was always known as the Nash Building to us. ... When the war ended, Carbide actually was running the project.

SI: When you were still at Columbia, did you have any interaction with the scientists beyond that initial meeting?

LS: No, unfortunately, I did not.

SI: Were you aware that things were going on down in the basement?

LS: Or, you know, in the whole building, sure. There was a lot going on.

SI: Was the campus just filled with military personnel?

LS: No, aside from the naval officers training program ... there were no obviously visible military around. I'm sure that some came in for meetings with the scientists. There might have been an occasional uniform around, but not that it was overwhelming or that I was aware of. I think Columbia probably was the same atmosphere as Rutgers during the war. It must have been a much smaller student body; it was quiet.

SH: How did you view the use of the bomb at that time?

LS: When I found out about it?

SH: How did you feel when you found out about it back then?

LS: Well, I suppose from a very unsophisticated point of view I thought it was, I probably thought it was a good thing, because, you know, the propaganda was [that] it ended the war soon, that much sooner, and so I think I accepted the fact that this had happened. I guess I was a little bit proud of having, you know, been around all of this happening. It was kind of exciting to find out about it. I was also thinking of my brother, who was already approaching draft age.

SI: ... What was it like to be in New York, just in general, during the war? What was the atmosphere of the city?

LS: Well, I've always loved being in New York, even in wartime. I think New York had so much to offer, and we did take advantage of all the cultural activities or the museums and so forth, so I always loved New York. Of course, we did not go out very much at night; with the brownouts, New York was pretty dark!

SI: Were those things cut back because of the war?

LS: No, not particularly. I think one problem was, you know, when you went shopping, food shopping, you had to limit your purchases according to how many stamps you had left in the ration book, but that was my mother's problem. ... I just took it as a matter of day-to-day life. Of course, a black market existed and some things could be bought for a price.

SI: One story that I always heard about New York is the time a B-17 flew into the Empire State Building. Do you remember hearing anything about that?

LS: Oh, yes, I remember that.

SI: I think it was either '44 or '45.

LS: Was it during the war?

SI: Yes, or maybe it was just after.

LS: I remember the incident. You know, I do remember that. It was 1945.

SI: Did you just hear about it or did you see the wreckage?

LS: I heard about it on the radio. It was a Saturday morning. I'm not sure that I saw the wreckage. I was working at Columbia. My brother took the subway down, but it was cloudy and the top of the building was not visible. I just remember the story of the girl who was on the elevator that came all the way down. She had been quite severely injured. That was the story

that stood out in my mind. I guess at some point there was that movie with King Kong on top of the Empire State Building, too. That was earlier.

SI: Do you remember, particularly earlier in the war, the blackouts in New York?

LS: Yes, oh, yes, all the homes had to have black shades. If you had a white shade, you had to have a dark green outside, and you had to draw the shades at night, yes.

SI: Were you in New York at this time, or were you still in Union City?

LS: We moved to New York in 1940, so it was just before the war. We were living in New York when war was declared.

SI: How did that work with air raid wardens and things like that? Do you remember?

LS: I don't specifically remember air raid warnings. We lived in brownstones. [When] we first moved to New York, we were on West 22nd Street, and then after that, we moved to 82nd Street, off Riverside Drive, and subsequently to 74th Street, but of course, by that time the war was over. The war, I guess, was over by the time we left 22nd Street. But I don't think there were air raid warnings around, but nothing ever happened, you know. I don't even remember sirens going off, but there were drills now and again. A family friend was a neighborhood air raid warden, I recall. He would participate in the drills.

SI: Did you correspond with anyone from your high school or from your neighborhood who went into the service, or did you know anyone in the service?

LS: Once I left high school, I had no ties whatsoever with my classmates, as I didn't live in the same neighborhood with any of them; I took a city bus to school and usually came home after classes. However, the son of old family friends who lived on MacDougal Street in the city was drafted into the Army. He became a parachutist. I remember the last time we saw him; when he was home on leave, he told us he was going on maneuvers somewhere overseas and that he had a feeling he would not come back. He said every time he jumped he thought it might be the last time. Sure enough, a short time later, we learned he had been killed in a jump over Brazil. We were extremely touched by this news and his mother never got over his loss.

SI: Did your brother ever have to go into the service?

LS: Yes. When he graduated high school in January 1946, the draft was still in effect and he had to report to the draft board. He went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where the boys were given the option of enlisting for either a year-and-a-half, two or three years. As a draftee, time in the service was open-ended. He opted for a year-and-a-half and was inducted into the Army. He received his basic training at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, and then, went to a school for mechanics in Atlanta for three months. In October of that same year, he was sent to Seoul, Korea, as a member of a motor pool which took care of vehicles for the American peacekeeping forces. He was discharged in October '47, and then, enrolled at the College of Engineering at NYU. To go back to a little of the history, the Japanese had controlled Korea for

fifty years. At the end of World War II, Korea was to become an independent nation, but there was no government in place. The country was divided between the United States and Russia until such time as a unified government could be formed. The U.S.-controlled sector went to the 38th Parallel; Russia had the rest. When Syngman Rhee was elected president of South Korea, the United States pulled out, but the Russians had no such intention. When troops from North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel, it led eventually to the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. I recall that a cousin of ours who had served in World War II was in the Reserves and he went to Korea during that war. Fortunately, he came home.

SH: In light of your involvement in the Manhattan Project, how did you view the Rosenbergs when that whole case surfaced and instances like that?

LS: Yes, that was interesting. At that time, I had a friend, who I was working with at General Motors, and she had left and went to work for the FBI. ... She was really interested in this case, and I remember the night they were executed. We had tickets for a Broadway play, and she was late because she would not leave the house until she had heard that they had been executed. We were in the theater on that night.

SH: So your friend was very in favor of the execution.

LS: Oh, yes. Yes, she was. ... I think I probably had some doubts about whether they were really guilty, but I didn't feel strongly about it one way or the other. But she'd felt very strongly about it.

SI: So after the project was turned over from Columbia to Carbide, where did you go from Carbide?

LS: Well, I stayed with the project until after war was ended in August of 1945. Then the project was shut down in New York and we were all offered the opportunity to go to Oak Ridge, Tennessee if we wanted to stay with Union Carbide. I did not want to do that, so I left.

SI: What did you do then?

LS: I went downtown. I worked for an insurance company for about a year or so, a little bit over a year. ... Then a friend of mine that I was working with had found employment with General Motors, and at that time they were on Columbus Circle, so she said, "Oh, the pay is much better there." So I did leave and went to GM.

SI: How long were you with GM?

LS: From 1947 until I retired in 1983.

SI: During World War II, were you ever involved with the USO or the Red Cross or anything like that?

LS: No, no, I was not. Some of us, some of the girls that I worked with at Columbia, we would go down to 42nd Street, where the arcades were and so forth. There were servicemen around and you'd sort of meet up and talk and maybe ... go for coffee with them, but I never did go to any USO functions or dances, no.

SH: Do you recall any of the instances with submarines coming into New York Harbor?

LS: No, I'm sure I was aware of it, but ... I have no memories of anything like that.

SI: What was your work schedule like at Columbia? Was it sped up because of the war? Did you have to work extra shifts?

LS: No, no.

SI: Was it just a standard, eight-hour workday?

LS: Yes, and a half day on Saturdays. In fact, it was mostly typing at that time, typing up orders and things like that. As I look back on it, not very interesting.

SH: What type of work did you do with General Motors when you finally went on?

LS: Well, I went to work immediately with the legal staff

SI: What kind of duties did you have in that?

LS: I started as a secretary-steno, working in various areas, such as workmen's compensation, insurance, litigation and, by the time I retired, some thirty years later, had advanced to Executive Secretary to the Vice President and General Counsel. One fond, early memory I have was seeing Alfred P. Sloan, who was quite old by then, but still an active member of the Board. I also recall coming through a doorway and literally bumping into John Thomas Smith, the first General Counsel, who, in the late '20s, had incorporated Buick, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Pontiac and Cadillac into one company, General Motors. His office paneling had been brought over from a mansion in Europe, something wealthy millionaires did in those days. It was one of the most beautiful offices I have ever seen. Then, in the late '60s, Ralph Nader wrote his diatribe against the Chevrolet Corvair, *Unsafe at Any Speed* and it was the beginning of government involvement with car safety. There were hearings in the Senate and GM executives were called to testify. This exposure was something new for them and they looked for a prominent attorney from outside the staff to be the General Counsel. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time and I got the job as his secretary. It was a very interesting and busy time. I later worked with one of GM's first female executives. She became the Corporate Secretary and we worked chiefly on Board matters and the annual stockholders' meeting. The Board was (and still is) composed of some top executives of major corporations, so that was also exciting. Those years, and being involved with the Manhattan Project, is something that I reflect back on with some pride.

SH: What types of things go on with the legal staff? You wouldn't think of a car company having a whole legal staff at hand all the time.

LS: Oh, yes. You can imagine that the largest corporation in the world would need legal advice on almost everything except actually designing and building the cars. Corporate law may seem dull, but it is really extremely interesting and diverse. Corporate governance is complex and involves everything from antitrust, government agencies, all aspects of finance and insurance, personnel, and a lot of litigation. The overseas division and Treasurer's office were in New York and were very big. Later, along came class actions.

SH: So it was a headquarters situation that covered all the plants.

LS: The legal staff. There was a staff in Detroit also and a staff in New York, so we handled more of the things that went on in the East and Detroit did a lot of the other.

SI: Did the legal staff have to handle any of the dealings with the auto unions?

LS: In Detroit, yes. That was a big function there. That was a really an ongoing situation. Those things go on from one end of the year to the other, one year to the next.

SI: Were you ever in a union, such as a secretaries union? Were you ever in that or any kind of union?

LS: Well, there was always a sense the union was very strong with the auto workers. There was always an effort to unionize the clerical and the white-collar, and that never succeeded, we were never unionized. I remember when there were strikes and they would picket the building, but I think that happened just before I arrived on the scene. I don't remember that there were pickets. There was a big, there were a lot of anti-trusts. That was actually the big thrust of the legal work in New York was anti-trust, the break up of GM and Dupont and all of that.

SI: One of the things that I've always read about corporations in the 1950s and even in the early '60s was, particularly IBM, it was almost like a corporate family that imposed strict regimentation on its employees. Did you notice any of that at GM?

LS: No, but it was it certainly was a corporate family. Yes, it was a very strong tie in relationships between employer and employee. We were well looked after; there was a lot of respect between employer and the employee. I remember IBM, actually they were the ones under Watson, where the men had to wear blue suits and so forth, white shirts, but GM was not regimented to that extent.

SI: Were there corporate get-togethers, picnics, dinners, that sort of thing?

LS: No, no events sponsored at a corporate level. Each department did their own thing. The legal staff hosted a beautiful luncheon for the secretaries at Christmas-time at a top restaurant or hotel which would be attended by the head of the staff or another attorney. Some departments would have office Christmas parties, but we never did. The corporation sponsored a chorus at

one time and they would have a yearly concert and reception to which we were invited. There were also bowling leagues and softball teams. New York is not as company-oriented as Detroit, partly because the employees do not live close to each other or to the office.

-----END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE-----

SI: Okay, we've been looking at your two pins, the atomic bomb and the Army-Navy emblem. We were curious if there was any kind of ceremony or anything associated with giving them out.

LS: No, I don't remember anything special. The head of the department had x number of pins and handed them out, gave us a certificate, and it was work as usual. I don't recall anyone from the government.

SI: Has there ever been any kind of ceremony?

LS: Reunion?

SI: Yes.

LS: No.

SI: No reunion?

LS: No.

SI: Since there have been a lot of ceremonies recently with the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bomb, has there ever been any recognition?

LS: No, I'm sure they lost track of us.

SI: Have you ever had anything through Columbia University?

LS: No, no, it was strictly a government project, you know. Columbia, per se, I don't think they had any records. They were probably all government records and heaven only knows probably blew them up with the bomb, dropped them over Hiroshima.

SI: How did you and Mr. Saldarini meet and marry?

LS: Well, as he pointed out, his aunt had a summer, well, she had residence at the beach, and I used to go down with a friend of mine and he would be there with his friends and that's how we met. ... We would double date with some of his friends and one thing led to the other.

SI: What have been your interests recently, since you've retired from GM?

LS: One of the first things I did was to volunteer with the Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center. I was involved with the free classical music concerts the Society did for New York City

school children; I assisted staff members with office work and worked on the organization of some of the special fund-raising events. Both Joe and I are fond of chamber music and have been Friends of the Society and subscribers for some twenty years. There, again, I have met some interesting people, both in and out of the music world. I am indulging in another passion of mine - poetry and literature - by attending lectures and discussion groups; and I am also actively involved with a poetry series in our apartment building. I was interested to learn that the past Poet Laureate, Robert Pinsky, is a Rutgers graduate; I like his poetry very much and believe he has done a lot to popularize poetry. Joe and I also travel quite extensively and I have accompanied him on his volunteer executive assignments overseas. Both of us go into New York a couple of times a month. This is the best part of the country in which to retire - never a dull moment. It's not been a dull life, either.

SI: Do you visit the art museums?

LS: Oh, yes, yes, go to the theater, the opera, concerts.

SI: What other poets do you read besides Robert Pinsky?

LS: Well, I did take a course in the modern poetry, but not the rap or the café types, so everything from Yeats and TS Eliot. I'm doing some of the eighteenth century poets now.

SI: Where did you take your courses?

LS: At Fairleigh Dickinson University in Hackensack, Teaneck- Hackensack, which is close to home.

SI: Is this since you've retired?

LS: Yes. If I lived in the New Brunswick area, I'd be on Rutgers Campus, frequently. See, that was my mistake. I always thought I never wanted to be a teacher, and now at this point in my life, I think that is what I should've done, stayed in academe.

SI: Do you have any more questions? Do you think there is anything we have forgotten to ask you?

LS: No, I don't think so. I've enjoyed talking to you, and I hope I've given you some insight into what it was like being in New York and working on the atomic bomb project.

SI: Absolutely.

LS: I thank you.

SI: Thank you very much actually.

LS: My pleasure.

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Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy 8/8/01

Reviewed by Lita Saldarini 8/01