

CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

MARIA KRAMAR

Putnam: I'd like to start by saying that this is a tape. We are interviewing Maria Kramar. It is February 25th and in fact her 35th wedding anniversary.

Kramar: 36th.

Putnam: 36th, sorry. 36th wedding anniversary. Eldon Jacobsen is on the camera, I'm Jean Putnam and I'm the interviewer today. So we're going to start, Maria, with having you give us a background of how you started in this world and giving us a summary all the way up to the time you got to Central.

Kramar: I was born in 1933 in Budapest, Hungary. My parents - well just a few words. My father was a professional officer and he taught at the military academy and my mother was a linguist, French and German was her major. I had a brother and there were only two of us in the family and I attended the Sacre Couer, the Sacred Heart School in Budapest all the way to my 16th year when the state by then took away the school from the religious order and the school became a state run high school and that's where I finished high school in 1951 in Budapest. Well, in 1951 that we had already six years past the war. The Communists were in full power and they certainly launched their attack against the so called former middle class so we were evicted from our house and we were taken to the countryside. There was no chance for me to ever even consider higher education. I should have been only just happy to finish high school and we were taken to a so-called commune in the countryside and our family had to work there. Eventually my father petitioned the government and we were allowed to move a little bit closer to Budapest, about 40 miles out of Budapest in a small village and from there I, in 1953, I started commuting to Budapest in a pharmacological company that was the closest that came to chemistry what I always wanted to study. I could certainly not study, but I could at least work. That was a daily commuting by train and I - eventually I enjoyed working there because very soon I was taken into the lab and I was part of a group that did some of the basic lab testings of different medicines and products and as a worker, at that time, I was 22 years old, I was allowed to pursue on evening school basis medical technology. So I did medical technology for two years and I did get my diploma in 1955 and then came 1956 and in 1956 certainly that was the Hungarian Uprising in October and as a young, idealistic person I certainly participated wholeheartedly in it and eventually in 19 - at the end of the revolution and when it was crushed by the Russian Army then I left Budapest and in late November I arrived in Vienna, Austria. In Austria because I did speak German, I learned that from our childhood as a second language that was spoken in our house, I had a very good fortune. The Austrians were wonderful and within three weeks I was working in a medical laboratory and soon after I had a little apartment for myself that I rented and somehow life started getting normal again for me. I still missed that I couldn't study but I had to keep myself alive so I had to work so the two - in Europe you can't do the two together. You either study or you work. They do not have the same kind of arrangement as you can do it here in this country. So eventually, let's see, I was working in a medical laboratory and in a very short time I got immersed in everything that Vienna could offer. Cheap standing tickets, you know, in the opera halls in the concert halls. Anyway, I just had a marvelous time and although I missed my family very much, that was the first time that I was away from the family. Life was kind of bearable. Then in 1960 - well, actually from '58 on I got very much involved in the Hungarian Cult movement which was taboo under the Communist era in Hungary. So I taught many of these youngsters who left Hungary and wanted to get involved in some youth organizations. Anyway, I took over the girls and I had a group in Vienna, about 60 girls that I was leading and I had taken them to different jamborees all over Europe and this is at one of these jamborees in Germany where I met Zolty. So it was in 1960 in Germany where I at the Isar Jamboree I met Zolty and he told me that in the fall he's coming to Vienna to work on his dissertation and so true enough a few weeks later he arrived in Vienna. Somehow I think the common paths and a lot of common interests really brought us together. We went to the concerts. We went for long walks in the Vienna woods. Somehow within about three, four months we knew that somehow fate is kind of bringing us together and so in - by Christmas we were engaged and February 25th in '61 we got married. Then I still I was working in that medical laboratory and Zolty got his fellowship during that year so everything was fine but eventually the subsequent years '61, '62 Zolty had to realize that he couldn't

finish his PhD in Vienna because at that time they didn't have reciprocity with American universities and so eventually we had to realize that if he really wants to do his career we have to come to the United States to - so that he can finish his degree. So I wasn't too happy about that, needless to say, because I didn't speak English and I had nobody that I knew - whom I knew in the states so, you know, all these uncertainties and getting farther and farther away from my parents but eventually I had to give my consent because we had a little girl by then. She was seven months old and Zolty's parents I thought were right when they said that sooner or later he has to kind of finalize steps in his career. So in '62 December we came over and we landed in Omaha and people were very kind to me and Zolty's parents were wonderful and really took me as a family member. So we stayed with Zolty's parents until '63 August and then in August - by then Zolty took all his orals and the final examinations and he got the offer to teach here at Central. So in '63, just before the rodeo, we arrived in Ellensburg and we got into a small apartment on 1100 B Street here in Ellensburg. That was our first apartment and Zolty started teaching. Well, the first year here was very - I should say very difficult. I am the first one to admit all my independence was gone because I could not talk to people. I could not go to the store. I couldn't go to the doctor and tell them what's wrong with me when our second little girl was coming. So it was - it was somehow a lot of adjustments, you know, but eventually in '64, the next year, Eniko, our second daughter was born and I was sort of learning the language on my own. I listened to the television programs. I read a lot of books. Many times I didn't understand more than three words in a sentence, but it was enough that overall I got the meaning and I think if you really realize that you have to swim or sink you learn the language very fast. So by '64 summer I felt I have enough basic English knowledge on a very basic level that I should be able to start college here and that was my dream ever since I left the country and ever since the Communists denied that possibility for me. So here I was in '64, 31 years old and with kind of sparing English knowledge but anyway, I started school. But I didn't want to tell anybody I started school. I thought if I flunk out it's my own business and you know, nobody should laugh about me. I was careful enough to choose mostly courses in the natural sciences. That is math, chemistry, physics, and after you eventually learn the basic jargon in these fields you pretty much - you can survive. I had very very good teachers at the first year. I remember many times after class I had to go to the professor and ask to explain it again because I didn't quite get everything and I never regretted it that I started because somehow, some way I could keep a B average and I just thoroughly enjoyed being in school. Well, according to plans, then eventually in '69 I graduated from the University. I had a chemistry major and math minor. Math and physics, I had two minors. In '68 summer my - one of my professors who was chair at the time offered me that there would be a National Science Foundation grant and it I would consider working for him but I had to be a graduate student then. It was Clint Duncan who at the time was the chair and I had a great admiration for the man as a teacher and - well, in many ways. So I discussed it with Zolty and the next thing was I was enrolled in graduate school and that's when the real fun started. Then I could really just concentrate, you know, on chemistry courses and I started my research and with the guidance of Dr. Duncan in four years I finished my masters. Well, at 1973 during graduate school I was working part time in the chemistry stockroom. I was working with the chemicals and as a store clerk but eventually I couldn't get a permanent job there because of the civil service rules. There was a person in there and so, you know, I could not replace him unless he quits. So, I was starting to find a job here in Ellensburg as a chemist. Needless to say that it was - a masters degree is too much maybe for anything else here but it's not enough to teach at the University so I thought I will fall back on medical technology. The chemistry degree I learned, you know, that that might be helpful. Well, it turned out the hospital tried to sort of hire me but obviously they needed several courses that was necessary for their protection from the blood bank, blood working and so forth certified in this country so eventually it would have been a long process to really get certification as a med tech here in the country so I thought well, the next best thing is then I will go back and I will pick up a few other courses that might enable me to get a job elsewhere. So I didn't want to leave town. I mean, our children were still you know like five, seven, something like that and they had several, let's see, special programs like piano and riding and swimming, you know, and they had to be transported and so - and the children were always number one in our family so I didn't want to leave town and so I started taking courses in typing, accounting, office management and so forth for a whole year. At the end at 1974 the first job I applied for and I got it was as program assistant in the Upward Bound program that was led as defined by Rodney Converse and a year later I was placed Upward Bound grant was over and then I worked for the Educational Opportunities Program for another year and eventually I think it was in '75 when I was transferred to Affirmative Action office in Barge Hall at that time under Madalon Lalley and when she left and it was Gale LeCompte and when Gale LeCompte left came Nancy Howard, I think, in '84 and

eventually I think it was in '84 or '85 and I first got a phone call from Dr. Duncan that they needed somebody in the chemistry department and whether I could do it at least on a part time basis because they were really in a bind. The person who was in the stockroom left and so they needed somebody right now to prepare the labs and so forth. So I discussed it with Nancy Howard and she was very very kind and she let me do it at least on a part time basis so half day I was up in chemistry and half day I was in the Affirmative Action office but then eventually when the person finally left for good who was in the Chemistry Department preparing the labs then Dr. Duncan called me again and said do I want to apply for it because it's here. So I did apply for it and from '85 on or '86 by then - '86 I think, I was working full time back in the Chemistry Department. There I was - my official title was Science - Research - Scientific Research Technician II but my job what it really entailed was preparing every lab that the department offered for students from freshman to senior level. Prepare reagents, calibrate instruments, order everything for the academic year, be - let's see, responsible for the safety procedures for the first aid and everything that involved, you know, safety in the laboratory. I had - student help was given to me and I had very very fine help by many of the students and for the last ten years I had this marvelous opportunity to finally work in the job that I was trained for and I had - I can only say good and very very fond memories from those last ten years in the Chemistry Department. I enjoyed working with the faculty. I still and until I die will respect Clint Duncan and I had very very good relationships with everybody I worked with. I had very fine people in the Accounting office, in budgets, in - wherever I had to deal with people and so somehow I felt I really I could take care of the department and always, you know, be helpful to their request whether it was ordering instruments or taking care of anything else. Well, in a certain degree - to a certain degree I must admit I kind of still miss them. In the fall of 1996, the first time in my 25 years of working for Central that that was the first time I had to take a leave of absence when I had the rare opportunity to go to Nepal on a trekking trip and Dr. Duncan agreed and I had a replacement there for the six weeks and so I had this wonderful experience, you know, being in Nepal but then the following spring, like spring quarter '96, Zolty, my husband was teaching through International Program in Hungary and certainly the deal was that I am going with him and so I just couldn't do it again to the department for another quarter to find a replacement so by then I asked Dr. Duncan if I could retire. So I retired from Central March 31, 1996 and Zolty, after teaching in Hungary, retired July 1, 1996. Since then we, you know, enjoy retirement. I still am very busy in many ways. Do plan a lot of trips. Have been on a lot of trips and that's where I am.

Putnam: Well, that's a wonderful story. I'd like to go back and just ask you a little bit more specifically a couple things and if you don't have an answer just say so. Obviously you had some contacts both as a student and as a staff member here at Central. You mentioned some names, Clint Duncan is one. Are there any names of any other students, staff, faculty, administrators that you found to be effective that were positive or that were part of your -

Kramar: Well Jean, I think I was kind of in a unique situation because my husband was on the faculty. So at the very beginning I didn't really want to mention that to anybody because my English was so poor and I thought it's nobody's business what my connection to Central is. I was a student. My job was to perform in class and to gain knowledge, you know, of what I was pursuing. So when I enjoyed, let's say, either the teaching style, the teaching effectiveness or so of certain people, these are my own opinions. I happen to respond very much to Clint Duncan because he was the one who introduced me into research and he was tremendously patient and helpful to me getting familiar with the type of research we were doing. I just felt he was a marvelous mentor at the time and somehow this trust and mutual respect for each other just reminds until the very end. I also enjoyed very much certain other classes that I have taken. I enjoyed very much Jay Bachrach and Peter Burkholder who on a different level - those were electives courses I had taken in the philosophy department. They opened for me windows that I - that were new to me in a different field. I thoroughly enjoyed some of the music teachers, Bonnie Bricker Smith who was a very dear friend of ours and certainly Marty Kaatz who eventually became, you know, a very very good friend of ours that we skied now for 25 years together and hiked. So eventually, you know, I think first it was respect and enjoying and a certain teacher's approach and teaching. Eventually, you know, our friendship with other faculty people came because of our future engagement with Central through Zolty and my work. So, I don't know -

Putnam: Did you - did you have any chance to have any perceptions of any of the administrators, the presidents, the deans, other department chairs, that sort of thing as you were working either in Affirmative Action or back in the Department of Chemistry? Was there any in there that you might have remembered or not?

Kramar: Well, Burt Williams certainly was a very very good friend of my husband's and we did, you know, spent quite a bit of time together. So was Fritz Clark at the time when he was the Assistant Attorney General. But I would say Jean, they were mostly friends on social level, not particularly through working. Bernie Martin was Dean of Sciences for a number of years when I was a student but I really didn't have too much to do with him at that time yet when fate brought us together again and I started taking computer classes I had taken two or three classes from him and I thoroughly thoroughly enjoyed. I learned a lot from the man. So was Jimmy Brooks who was President, you know, during the first years when I was a student and so I as a student didn't have much to do with him but when I was still working before chemistry department in Affirmative Action office and so I had taken these management seminars. I don't know exactly what the title was. Leadership or I think it was management seminars. There were like four weeks we went after school and Jimmy Brooks had taught that and so I was just impressed by the way he came back after his long administration experience, he came back as a teaching faculty and I must say he was very effective. I found him very interesting and I learned a lot from him so -

Putnam: Now, you probably had a chance - you mentioned a couple things. Were there any extra curricular activities that you might have pursued while you were either a student or as a staff member here on the campus that you enjoyed any activities?

Kramar: Well, I, you know, I am very fond of music so and thank God my husband shares that love and so we always - we - originally Jean, I must say Ellensburg was a small little town that I really had to get used to. In all my life I lived either in Budapest or in Vienna until I was 34 years old and so it was - or 32 - it was kind of a big change in my life to adjusting to a small little college town but I must admit after the initial first year, that was rough in many ways but by the time I started college our two girls were nicely growing up and the University or at the time, the College had so many beautiful programs, concerts, plays, seminars that we listened to, discussions, symposia, it somehow I think the richness of the many different programs the University offered really helped and at the same time Seattle was not that far so for special events we did go over to Seattle but I think eventually I really truly learned to like this little town and enjoyed very much what it could offer.

Putnam: A couple other things, now did your children attend Central?

Kramar: Yeah, both of them did. After school - after high school both children started at Central. However, little gaps in between because both children - they wanted to try other avenues but eventually they both came back and graduated from Central. Kinga, the older one, she graduated as a nutrition and health major and Eniko, the younger one, she graduated in biology and - I thought it was biology and maybe health education. I am not quite sure but biology, certainly and then eventually Eniko stayed and she went through the masters program also here at Central and she got her masters in micro biology in '92, I think.

Putnam: Good, now when you were working as a staff member in the Department of Chemistry and well, even before that in the Affirmative Action office, do you recall any stories of any events that may have occurred, any humorous things that you remember about your working or were there any stories about any events that might have happened at any point that might be of interest to us?

Kramar: Well, as I said, you know, not so much. I can't really think of anything particularly humorous. I just had a marvelous time here at school. I must say my learning experience was great and I - my working experience just as good. Somehow I was always surrounded by the right people. I thank God never had any enemies and so everybody was just great and wonderful. I really remember a few words that I had to speak during the retirement party and I told Dr. Duncan after his words that I am one of the lucky ones really who

really is sorry to leave because somehow, especially the last ten years but even before, I just had a very very positive experience here.

Putnam: That's wonderful. Well, before we end our conversation today, I want to pursue something else which I think is a very important to your life and I think the contributions that you make. You mentioned taking a leave and taking a trek and I do know of your interest in cross country skiing and hiking and that sort of thing and I do also remember a trip we took together which I will never forget. However, would you share with us that trip and I know you have a sister that has also –

Kramar: A sister-in-law.

Putnam: Oh, an in law that has been involved and I don't know, who did you take the trip with?

Kramar: Actually, yes, it was my sister-in-law, Zolty's younger sister. She had been a very very accomplished climber. She came to the Northwest in 64, I think. At the time she did her residency as an ophthalmologist in Portland and eventually settled down as a physician in Seattle and she was very very much involved in climbing and she was a member of the 1978 all women Annapurna climb. So she was certainly a person whose advice and guidance I would certainly follow and she told me long long time ago that someday when times are, you know, such that she can not really climb or she doesn't want to climb the big mountains she will take me to the Himalayas knowing my tremendous love and respect for these big mountains because I just simply have to experience a sunset, a sunrise at those mountains because she knew how meaningful they would be to me. So last year, in 1996 this plan finally realized itself and we went to Nepal. My sister-in-law myself and another lady.

Putnam: You said 1956, are you meaning 1996?

Kramar: 1996, I'm sorry. 1996, last fall, October. We were planning to trek around Annapurna to do the?, to go to the ? Sanctuary and eventually up north to?, which was a Buddhist shrine and everything went according to plan and we - I, it's hard and I don't even attempt to describe what you feel when you sit, you know, on a little moraine that was accessible for me in front of the big mountains and we had good weather. I got - I stayed healthy during the whole trip and it was just a marvelous, beautiful experience. The only problem was at the very end when this unexpected storm came in that dumped six feet of snow at most places in Nepal, we got just the tail end of it but it was just enough that a few people, a few porters died in the vicinity where we were. We were only about 14,000 feet high at that time but anything above us on the pass got a tremendous amount of snow. So a few porters died and the main problem was that we also - we couldn't get a flight getting out from there and so we got stranded there for almost a week. I couldn't call Zolty. What happened. he didn't know what happened. He just picked up the paper on the day when I was supposed to call and he read that there was a major snow storm and avalanche killed over sixty trekkers in Nepal. So for a few days he was a very very - let's say anxious man. Eventually, one person from our group got on a helicopter and reached Katmandu and called and so from that point on Zolty knew that we are safe and fine. It's just a question of time and it took us another week. So with some delay eventually the day before Thanksgiving we arrived in Seattle and so the ordeal was over but as I said, we were never really in danger, it was just the unknown that bothered Zolty because he didn't know whether we were effected by the storm or not but it was a fantastic experience and I am ever grateful to my sister-in-law that this trip somehow, you know, got accomplished.

Putnam: Jake, do you have any questions?

Jacobsen: Yes, I do have one. When you were asked one question, you knocked on wood. Does that come here in the United States or is that kind of universal?

Kramar: We say that in Europe, all over. I - we certainly had it in Hungary and we also had it in Austria so I am sure that it probably is universal. (laughs)

Putnam: So, now you and Zolty are both retired. It's your first really full year of retirement and are you looking forward to many more physical kinds of things or -

Kramar: Well I think yes, by all means, the general thought is that if we want to accomplish some of the trips that we planned for a long time we better do it in the first ten years until our legs are still carrying us and we are able to do it. So last summer we barely came back from Hungary, then we went to Colorado. Then this Christmas we went again to Colorado to visit our daughter Kinga and our grandchildren and now in the spring, that is a week from today, we are leaving for a month to Australia. We have a friend there who sort of worked out an itinerary for us to visit major national parks there, major cities. So it will be a very exciting 30 days, you know. I'm really looking forward. Then in the spring, that is early summer, we would like to take an Austrian friend who will visit us - we would like to take her to British Columbia to some of the beautiful places that we knew and we cherish a lot, Banff and Lake Louise and in that area and then in the fall, that is in August, late August, we are going or planning to go to Germany to Bayreuth for a Wagner Festival and then in September Zolty committed himself to - on our own to teach one more quarter at Pecs University in Hungary. They invited him back and so he was willing to go.

Putnam: Does he teach in English?

Kramar: In English. That's how he was asked. In English, yes. They are both in American Cultural History and it always interested Zolty. He feels that he can contribute more in English and by all means giving the hopefully objective information about the United States in Europe. We always, in Europe we always represent or feel we defend America basically down in our heart we always feel you know, Hungary is home and we say so but actually home really means the Northwest. We traveled so much in the past years and when we really say let's go home that means the Northwest so it is interesting in Europe we defend America, here we call Hungary home but this is I think mainly because of the past. But - and then we certainly have plans eventually to go to Iceland. We would like to go back to Norway that we liked very very much from a previous trip and Zolty would like to go down to Patagonia to the south so.

Putnam: Well, it sounds like you have a wonderful, rich future ahead of you. Is there anything else that you have in mind that you would like to?

Kramar: No.

Putnam: Well, we thank you very much for your time and wish you well.

Kramar: You are very welcome.