The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MARY CHIAVARINI

Interviewed by: David T. Jones

Initial interview date: October 1, 2007

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Q: I'm interviewing Mary Chiavarini, starting on the first of October 2007. This is David Jones doing the interview.

Mary, I would appreciate it if you told me a little bit about your early life, when and where you were born and what your family was like.

CHIAVARINI: I was the first born of my family and my parents weren't terribly interested in my schooling, but I had some very good teachers. One of them took me to her home in Natick which is just outside of Framingham to visit her family, and I remember the clip-clop of the horse's shoes on the pavement on our way out. I don't remember much about the visit, but it was fun. I enjoyed it. My mother was more interested in what I was doing than my father was. He was, actually both of them were, born in Italy in the Parma area. They came to the United States I think about 1915, and my father became a citizen about 1936. I was always aware of my almost foreign birth, but it wasn't of course. I was born in the States in Framingham.

Anyway, I don't want to dwell too long on that time. That's a long time ago, 1916, and all I know is that I enjoyed going to school. My family wasn't too impressed that I was a valedictorian. I didn't think they knew what it meant, exactly, and I wasn't so sure of it myself at the time. But I remember that, when it was announced, we were in the high school in a large room. When they announced it, I thought somebody else was going to be chosen. I had no idea that I was, and I remember thinking, "Is he saying my name?" He was. That was the principal of the school, Mr. Magoon (laughs). Anyway. What else do I say?

Q: What about your brothers and sisters?

CHIAVARINI: Well my mother had seven children, but the first was stillborn. Then two children died from, what I will say, young children's diseases; whatever they were. So that left four of us. My sister was always furious, since the teacher would say, "Are you going to be as smart as Mary?" I don't blame her.

My other sister, she was much younger, so she had a different life than I did. That was all right, I didn't mind. I was very popular in high school.

Q: Did you have a brother?

CHIAVARINI: I had a younger brother, very much younger. He refused to go to high school. He learned how to be a professional builder of banks in the Framingham area.

Q: What did your father do?

CHIAVARINI: My father was a laborer. He really did very hard labor. He worked in a foundry. He was sort of an embarrassment to me. He was always trying to be funny, and I always thought it was sort of ridiculous for him to be like that. But anyway, that's just it.

Q: Did they ever return to Italy?

CHIAVARINI: My mother did when she was in her eighties. One of her brothers said, "I always said your mother was the best looking of us all." And she was; she was a good looking woman. She was a very nice, wonderful mother. But she didn't want us to stray from the right and narrow. I guess most mothers feel that way. I remember she wouldn't let me go to the prom with a boy. He had to meet us at the head of the street. I remember at the time I was upset.

Q: Was this a public school?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. Oh, of course. It was a public school.

Q: What was your favorite subject?

CHIAVARINI: In high school I loved biology. I always though I'd like to be a biology teacher. But I never made it to teaching. Otherwise, I never felt oppressed. I never felt that I wasn't being treated right. I never had any feelings like that. I enjoyed my high school. I enjoyed going to school.

Q: Did you have any favorite books.

CHIAVARINI: I don't remember. I know I read a lot. I don't remember if there were any favorites.

Q: Did you have a big family around you in Framingham?

CHIAVARINI: No. My mother and father had nobody here. They came on their own. In fact, I always said they spent their honeymoon on the boat and they didn't get off in New York, they got off at Boston. They stayed with friends of the family. My father had been over here for a while, and he went back and married my mother. Then they had their honeymoon on the boat. That boat trip was rather basic ... it wasn't a tourist ship. There were a lot of immigrants on it who were coming to the States. I remember this from what my family told me because I wasn't yet born. I was born in Framingham in 1916. So they were already here then. And I grew up there.

Q: Was the church an important part of your life?

CHIAVARINI: Yes! We were Catholics. We attended the Catholic-Italian Church at that time, and the priest was from Italy. My mother was very religious. I can't say that my father was; but that's all right. He lived to be 88 and mother was 95. So that was pretty good.

Q: Did you speak Italian at home?

CHIAVARINI: We spoke the Parma dialect which is a little bit different than Italian. But I can get along in Italian. I studied Italian for a while in Framingham.

Q: Did you ever talk politics at home?

CHIAVARINI: No, but my father and mother did. I remember when the Sacco and Vincenti case came up. All of the people in Framingham followed that.

Q: What was their position?

CHIAVARINI: That they were not to blame for what happened. They were supposed to have killed somebody. They were finally executed. But everybody thought, our friends thought, that that was an injustice. I remember that.

Q: Well, you would have graduated from high school in about 1934?

CHIAVARINI: '34.

Q: Yes, 1934. And your brother-in-law's notes say you worked for a few years on a school project with the wife of a school superintendent.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I remember I had to take some dictation from her, and I did a lot of typing.

Q: Had you studied typing and dictation?

CHIAVARINI: At night school. And I was very good at it.

Q: Did you do that after high school?

CHIAVARINI: No, it was during high school. I used to say they prepared us to go out and work. Of course, my mother and father had nothing to do with it. That was what I was to do, and I did it.

Q: Was there any thought of going to college?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, I knew that was impossible. My father earned under $25 a week, and he had four children at that time.

Q: Well, this was in the depths of the Depression.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Were you personally affected, was your family affected, by the Depression?

CHIAVARINI: No, my father managed to work. The most he ever made was $25 a week. That was considered a pretty good wage. With that money, they borrowed from the bank, the Farmers and Mechanics Bank, enough money, I think it was $5,000, to build a home. We lived in that house a long, long time.

Q: Do you still have the family home?

CHIAVARINI: No, we sold it not long ago. We made quite a bit of money; considering the times. We paid off the mortgage.

Q: What made you think of going to Washington?

CHIAVARINI: I don't know. I took a test. You had to take the test. I got almost 100.

Q: Was this a typing and dictation test?

CHIAVARINI: It was typing anyway. But I remember three other girls took it too, but they didn't do as well as I did.

Q: The notes say that you went to Washington in 1937. What was Washington like?

CHIAVARINI: It was marvelous. It was wonderful. Considering I came from such a small town existence you might say. It was a city; I'd never been to a city.

Q: Not even Boston?

CHIAVARINI: Well, another girl and I used to go in for lunch on a Saturday once in a while. But I mean Boston was no comparison with Washington.

And there I worked for the ICC -the Interstate Commerce Commission. It went out of business about 10 years ago.

Q: Where were you living in Washington?

CHIAVARINI: 1925 Biltmore Street. It's off of Columbia Road,

Q: Did you have roommates?

CHIAVARINI: I had an older woman. We shared a bedroom which I didn't mind. Before that another girl lived in that room. I loved her, a wonderful girl from Tulsa. I went out to visit her later after she went back home. I enjoyed that. I especially enjoyed a horseback ride at a local farm. And horse took off; it took off. I was just hanging on. I'd never been on a horse before. (laughter)

We had gone to a church function and that was one of the things they haa horseback ride. The horse just took off. I never felt such bumps in my life. (laughter)

Q: Did you do any more horseback riding after that?

CHIAVARINI: No! No more.

Q: What were your supervisors like at the ICC?

CHIAVARINI: They were very nice. I started to put in right away for a transfer to the Boston office, and I got it not quite a year later. I was transferred to Boston.

Q: So you lived in Boston?

CHIAVARINI: No, I commuted.

Q: From Framingham?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. We had wonderful service in those days. I used to take the morning train at 20 minutes of eight, and I had a mile walk to the train station. I met another woman, an older woman, who commuted from Worcester. The train from Worcester stopped in Framingham. I usually sat with this older woman; she was very nice and sweet to me.

Q: How long did you work in Boston?

CHIAVARINI: About a year and a half, maybe two years.

Q: And then did you come back to Washington?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I came back. It had changed a lot.

Q: Why did you decide to come back to Washington?

CHIAVARINI: I don't know, I don't remember.

Q: Did you come back to an ICC job in Washington?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. That is when I also transferred to Rockefeller's office.

Q: Tell me about Mr. Rockefeller's office? What were you doing?

CHIAVARINI: I was a secretary. I remember once I was taking dictation. And he stopped and asked me what I thought of what he was saying. I was appalled that he asked his secretary what she thought of his dictation. Anyway, I didn't stay with him too long. But I liked the girls that he had. He had all these wealthy girls who had been to college. They kind of took to me. I guess they'd never had any friends who had such lowly lives. I enjoyed it, but I didn't stay there too long.

Q: This was at the Department of State then?

CHIAVARINI: No. I think it was, but I wasn't involved with that.

Q: What was Rockefeller doing at that time?

CHIAVARINI: He was head of South American Affairs. I remember taking Spanish lessons while I was there because I thought I'd like to go to South America. I didn't do too badly at learning the language.

Q: Mary, I wanted to get back to your World War II time.

CHIAVARINI: Okay, I was in Washington. I was with the State Department and my brother-in-law says I took another test; I don't remember doing that, but maybe I did.

Q: How long did you stay in Washington?

CHIAVARINI: I didn't stay too long. I went to New York to take a plane to fly to Europe.

Q: Did you go through the Azores?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And that where the airplane stopped. And then we flew on to Europe.

Q: Eventually you got to Albania?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I don't remember how.

Q: Your bio sketch says that you got to Albania and you were the secretary for the American Ambassador in Albania.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: What was Albania like at that time?

CHIAVARINI: In looking back, it was terrible. I lived with three other girls in Albania. We had rented a house, and it was really very nice; but it came to us, we were a little bit more sophisticated than the house was. We had an Albanian woman was the housekeeper. She was very nice but not sophisticated woman. We had a nice time.

I remember once we had to light a fire under the hot water heater to heat the water. It got overheated. It was shaking back and forth. We didn't know what to do except to kill the fire, and then it stopped. We were scared to death.

Q: Were these women also working at the U.S. Embassy?

CHIAVARINI: No. I've forgotten. One of them was there only temporarily. She left after a little bit. She was a flamboyant gal and was engaged to a colonel in the army before she was sent over to Albania. She was sent to Albania as a punishment. The other two of us were there on sufferance. But I didn't mind.

I had my first, my only experience, with an earthquake. I remember coming out the front door. You could hear the earthquake making funny noises, but nothing happened. Thank God.

Q: Well, this was your first experience with an embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: What was it like? Can you give me your appreciation of this kind of life and this kind of work?

CHIAVARINI: It was different, but I enjoyed it anyway. We did the usual work. Two of us did the secretarial work.

Q: Who was the officer in charge that you were working for and what was he like?

CHIAVARINI: I was working for anybody who needed help.

Q: I thought you were working for the officer in charge?

CHIAVARINI: I was.

Q: Who was he?

CHIAVARINI: Joseph E Jacobs.

Q: Was he career foreign service?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: What was he like?

CHIAVARINI: Well, he was a very... His wife dominated him. (laughter) He was active a little bit sometimes, moseying along instead of being forceful. He was there to decide whether the State Department should recognize Albania. He recommended that they should. But they didn't do it right away. I was there about a year and a half. Mr. Jacobs went to Washington to press his case, and I stayed back and didn't leave until he returned. And then I was transferred to Rome.

Q: What were the Albanians like as people?

CHIAVARINI: Well, it's funny; the other day I read a letter that I had sent to a friend of mine, here. Her daughter had sent the letter to me after she died and that letter told it like it was. So I left Albania and the United States. He came back, I was still there.

Q: Ambassador Jacobs.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. From Albania I was sent to Rome.

Q: Were the communists becoming prominent in Albania when you were there?

CHIAVARINI: Not that we knew it, but they were. Two girls, me and one other girl, were quite outspoken about how we felt about the Albanians. They were very nice to us. One of the Albanian women, a girl, was very nice to me, in fact, after I left and never went back. She and I would write to each other. The poor thing was sick, and she died not too long after I had left.

Q: You said that you and your friends were quite outspoken. What were you speaking out about?

CHIAVARINI: We thought the Albanian party was no good. (laughter) And we told the ambassador that, and he just laughed.

Q: Were there any other prominent embassy officers that you remember?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes, the British embassy had a military mission. We were very friendly with them. We saw them a lot socially. One of the girls saw one of the officers in London after she had left; she went back to London and she saw him.

Q: Were there other members of the U.S. embassy that impressed you.

CHIAVARINI: No. There weren't; the ambassador was it.

Q: Was there a prominent DCM (Deputy Chief of Mission)?

CHIAVARINI: No, there wasn't one.

Q: Was it a very small mission?

CHIAVARINI: It was. Our entertainment was on Saturdays when the airplane came in and dropped their mail and went on. The Jacobs always had them for lunch. They would come back and stopped with us for a while. She always had lunch for them.

Q: Was Mrs. Jacobs very prominent in the community then?

CHIAVARINI: No, nobody was prominent in the community. The only one we saw was an Albanian family that I got to know.

Q: Did you travel in the country while you were there?

CHIAVARINI: We did, but we always had to take along a Partisan. He was supposed to protect us I guess; but from what, I'm not sure. One trip we went to Yugoslavia. We went to Dubrovnik. We enjoyed it. But we always hated to have a Partisan along with us. I don't know what he was supposed to do, but he never did anything-and we had to feed him.

Q: How many would go on this trip?

CHIAVARINI: All of us girls, three of us. The girls and Mrs. Jacobs went.

Q: What was the attitude of the Albanians to the United States?

CHIAVARINI: As far as I could tell it was good. They wanted to be recognized. I don't know what else I can tell you about them.

Q: You said that from Albania you went to Rome.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Had you ever been to Rome before?

CHIAVARINI: No, I had never been. And it was great.

Q: Did you have family there?

CHIAVARINI: I had no family in Rome, but I went up to Parma and visited them.

Q: About what year was this?

CHIAVARINI: I can't tell you.

Q: Maybe about 1948? Or would it have been after that?

CHIAVARINI: I think it was after that.

Q: Were you assigned to the embassy in Rome?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Was Ambassador Jacobs also in Rome?

CHIAVARINI: He was assigned there on the military mission, and I went with him after he got there. Then he left, and I left. I didn't stay long in Rome. Then I was assigned to the Philippines.

Q: Can we talk a little bit more about Rome? Was the military mission separate from the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Separate in that he did what he wanted. He had his own objectives.

Q: His own responsibilities?

CHIAVARINI: And there were some riots in Rome at that time. I remember we were on the fifth floor and I had to stand on a chair to look out. I saw them. They tried to storm the embassy, but they didn't make it.

Q: Riot police held them back?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. They are called cheledai. I saw them trying to get through the gates, and they couldn't make it. Not that we had any military defenders. But I remember the rioters gave up.

Q: What were you doing personally at the embassy for the ambassador?

CHIAVARINI: Well I was taking his dictation and I met several other people. One of them was Mr. Unger. Have you ever heard of him? He was a wonderful guy, and I worked for him while Mr. Jacobs was on his way to Italy. I liked working for him, but I never ran into him again.

Q: Did you travel in Italy while you were at the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I had a boyfriend who was the general's aide. Of course, he had a jeep. He would pick me up in the evening and take me someplace. Often we went to the general's parties.

Q: Where did you travel in Italy?

CHIAVARINI: Well, we went all around Rome, and I went to visit my relatives.

Q: Did you feel very much at home?

CHIAVARINI: Oh no, I didn't because their lives were different. They were farmers. Their lives were entirely different than I had experienced.

Q: How long did you stay?

CHIAVARINI: Maybe a week.

Q: Did you visit any of the other great cities in Italy?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes, I visited Naples and Venice.

Q: Florence?

CHIAVARINI: Florence also.

Q: Were the Italians very pro-American?

CHIAVARINI: I would say so. Yes.

Q: This would have been a period in which the communist party in Italy was surging. Was this a problem?

CHIAVARINI: I think so. I can't give you any concrete information about that.

Q: How did the embassy work at that point? How was it functioning bureaucratically?

CHIAVARINI: It was doing very well. Of course, the embassy was a beautiful place. Everybody wanted to come to visit the embassy.

Q: Mary, I think I'll pause here and come back in maybe a week from now and we can go on. I don't want to tire you. When we resume we'll continue after your assignment in Rome.

Today is October 11, 2007. We will pick up the oral history of Mary Chiavarini. We will check a couple of points from the State Department biographic register that we may not have picked up previously.

Mary, as I have it from the bio register you spent a little time in Manila in 1946. And then went to Seoul in 1947. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about Manila first, immediately after World War II. Was it completely devastated? What was the embassy's operation like at that point?

CHIAVARINI: It was quite an experience. I had never witnessed a city that was so devastated. In this instance, it was by the Japanese. A girl I lived with used to point out some of the non-existent houses. She said, "So-and-so lived here," that she knew and had visited her. And she spent the war in Manila in a prisoner of war camp.

Q: Do you remember her name?

CHIAVARINI: She's dead now. Ruth Lovell was her name.

Q: Was she an American?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. That was her married name.

Q: Was she working at the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Were you or Ms Lovell with Ambassador Jacobs?

CHIAVARINI: No. She didn't know him, and he had spent time in Manila but long before I had ever gotten there. He and another State Department man had written a full report that was taken up by a lot of people. It was a thing that they should do.

Q: This was Ambassador Jacobs writing?

CHIAVARINI: I don't know who wrote it. But I think they both did.

Q: What was your position at the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, I was just a secretary. I didn't have any position.

Q: Were you working for anyone in particular?

CHIAVARINI: No, anybody who needed a secretary would call me.

Q: Did you get out into the countryside?

CHIAVARINI: I did. That's where I saw this devastation. It was really heart-rendering. Ruth would tell me so-and-so who I knew lived there. That really brought it home. Ruth was a very caring person, but not overtly-so. I never knew how much she was affected by it.

Q: Well, if she had spent the war in a prisoner of war camp she must have had a lot of unpleasant experiences.

CHIAVARINI: Well, I don't know. She never talked about that. But Mr. Davis, Nat Davis, was a member of the embassy, he was a top officer. I don't whether he was badly treated or not. I don't know that. Ruth never really talked about it either. But I think that she witnessed a lot of things that she didn't want to talk about even though the Japanese were responsible.

Q: Were there still any Japanese in the area?

CHIAVARINI: I don't really recall whether there were. There probably were some.

Q: Was the embassy set up very primitive? Were you working hand-to-mouth?

CHIAVARINI: No. Well, I think when they were imprisoned under the Japanese it was more of that nature. But not afterwards.

Q: The embassy took good care of you?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes, I never had any problems. I wasn't important enough.

Q: This was a comfortable assignment? I know you went back to the Philippines later.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, and I stayed for two years.

Q: But this was only for one year and then you moved.

CHIAVARINI: Well, I was called to go to my ambassador in Korea. He asked for me. And they sent me.

Q: That was certainly a pleasant experience. Showed how appreciated you were. I can tell.

So, the record has you going to Seoul in June, 1947. Can you describe how the embassy was operating?

CHIAVARINI: It was like nothing I had ever seen. But I know the ambassador was appreciated by the Koreans. The Koreans were very nice to me. I had no bad experiences there. But then, I was the ambassador's "pet" you might say. They were very good to me and I always liked them. I don't remember their names.

Q: This is the Korean staff?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: How was the embassy working?

CHIAVARINI: It worked fine as far as I could see and as far as I knew. The ambassador wasn't complaining about anything.

Q: Were there any problems that you could see at that time developing in the North?

CHIAVARINI: Well, yes. We all saw that. It was no surprise that they blew the place apart with their new bomb in Pyongyang. I never got to Pyongyang myself.

Q: Did you travel into the North at all while you were there?

CHIAVARINI: No, I didn't. I had a boyfrienhe was a genera's aide - who had a jeep, and we went outside Seoul on the weekends. We'd go to one place that was on the water. It was charming. I don't remember the name of it.

Q: Did you travel further into the South? I served in Korea in 1965-66.

CHIAVARINI: You probably did a lot more traveling than I did.

Q: I doubt it. Young lieutenants didn't have a lot of time off.

Did you get to Pusan?

CHIAVARINI: Yes I did. Another girl and I took a trip to Japan. We had to go to Pusan to transportation to Japan. We went there for our vacation. We had no problem. In Japan, we traveled on those fast trains, and that was quite an experience. I remember wondering whether I was going to get dressed in time for the train to arrive. I was really upset about that, but I made it. I didn't have to get off the train undressed.

Q: Did you take a boat then to Japan?

CHIAVARINI: We took a boat. Unfortunately, my traveling companion is dead now.

Q: Do you remember her name?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes! She was Bessie Miller. I knew her quite well because we lived in the same house in Korea. She lived in Florida although she worked with us.

Q: What was Ambassador Jacobs doing with the Korean government?

CHIAVARINI: Well, he was very close to them and worked with them closely. He was always satisfied with what they were doing. As far as I could see it was what he wanted. And, he was always trying to get the State Department to recognize the Korean government.

Q: Do you remember any other members of the embassy? The political counselor or the deputy chief of mission?

CHIAVARINI: No, I don't.

Q: Was there a sense that it was a very professional staff?

CHIAVARINI: I think it was professional because my boss was professional. He demanded that. And they gave it to him.

Q: You were in Seoul until the end of the year in 1948, and then you went to Prague.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And Ambassador Jacobs went to Prague. He was ambassador there.

Q: Did you have home leave before you went to Prague?

CHIAVARINI: I don't think so. They weren't too generous with home leave in those days. I remember I did get leave when my father died.

Q: When was that?

CHIAVARINI: I don't remember the date he died.

Q: Where did you leave from? What post were you in?

CHIAVARINI: I was in Korea.

Q: Oh, well then that was 1947-48.

CHIAVARINI: Probably 1948.

Q: Well, you were in Prague at a particularly important point. That was when the democratic government was overthrown wasn't it?

CHIAVARINI: I think so, but we weren't in any danger.

Q: What was the embassy like in Prague at that time?

CHIAVARINI: It wasn't like Manila because that had a lot of people.

Q: Was this a very small embassy in Prague?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. It was small.

Q: What was Ambassador Jacobs doing professionally in Czechoslovakia?

CHIAVARINI: Well, trying to get the State Department to recognize the Czech government.

Q: Did you travel in Czechoslovakia?

CHIAVARINI: I did. I had a car - a Ford. The ambassador had given me the money to buy it.

Q: How nice! That was a good opportunity to travel.

CHIAVARINI: It was another friend of mine, Lydia. She had retired and gone to live at home with her mother, but she came over to visit. The two of us took a trip through Czechoslovakia. We went up to Pilsen. I got stuck and the automobile horn got stuck. It wouldn't stop. I got some help from somebody to stop it. I didn't know what to do. Anyway, we got back home to Prague. We often talked about it; how we didn't know what to do. Lydia didn't know any more than I did although she had a car in the United States.

We got through a lot of terrible countryside as far as the automobile was concerned. There was a lot of mud. We got stuck in some mud. The local people helped us out even though we were from the embassy.

Q: Did you still see effects from World War II in the countryside?

CHIAVARINI: I don't remember.

Q: Were you able to do things in Prague that were interesting? Theater? Culture?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes. When Lydia was there we went to quite a few events. In the time that she was there we had the visit from the staff of "Kiss Me Kate. They came to Prague to do the play. I remember giving a pair of stocking to one of the players. She didn't have any.

Q: Was it part of a United States Information Agency (USIA) cultural exchange?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, it was.

Q: Were the officers at the embassy particularly effective? Were there any that you remember?

CHIAVARINI: They were all my friends. I used to see them after I left and if they were stationed in Washington; which a lot of them were. I still see them once in a great while.

Q: Oh, How nice! Any in particular from Prague that you remember?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, I remember them all.

Q: What projects were they working on?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, I don't remember that.

Q: Do you have any observations on the Czechs-the citizens of Prague and Czechoslovakia?

CHIAVARINI: I thought they were ineffective. I didn't think a lot of them.

Q: Any particular reason?

CHIAVARINI: Well, that's sort of faded into the past.

Q: Were you living in embassy housing?

CHIAVARINI: Lydia and I lived in the ambassador's house on the top floor. I remember burning the vegetables for Sunday dinner. I didn't watch the stove.

Q: Were you doing some of the cooking for yourself or for other people in the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: No, just for myself and Lydia and anybody that I would have invited.

Q: Were there other people living in the residence as well?

CHIAVARINI: No. We were up on the top floor in that famous embassy. It was a beautiful place. I don't remember, but it also may have had a swimming pool. I think they did, but I'm not sure. The rest of the building was very nice and very nicely furnished. We had two bedrooms up on the top floor. Lydia and I used to think we were so lucky. By that time she was staying a lot longer than I had expected her to visit. But that was all right since she had been in Albania with me. We talked a lot about those days. Of course, that was my first post.

Q: Yes.

CHIAVARINI: And Mr. Jacobs was there. That's where I met him.

Q: After Prague you went on to Rome.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: And that was about where we were going to pick up from last week. How did the circumstances evolve in Rome? Could you tell me about moving to Rome and what Rome was like then?

CHIAVARINI: Rome wasn't battered quite like Prague was. The Ambassador and I were up on the fifth floor of the embassy. I remember that there was a demonstration when the locals tried to enter the embassy. But the police got rid of them. I remember seeing it happen from the top floor of the embassy.

Q: What were they rioting about?

CHIAVARINI: I don't remember. It wasn't anything that was important.

Q: Well, this was one of the periods when the communist effort to take control of Italy was particularly strong.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, yes. I remember that.

Q: I know we were working to prevent the communist electoral effort. Do you remember anything about that?

CHIAVARINI: Well I just remember that one time when they tried to enter the embassy but were stopped by the Carabinieri.

Q: Was it very useful for you to be able to speak Italian in Rome?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I tell you I was always a bit embarrassed about my Italian. Because I really spoke the dialect of Parma. However, it was quite a bit like Roman-Italian, but I always felt embarrassed by it. I didn't have to do too much of it. I remember speaking with one Italian; but when I did speak a little but with him, he kind of laughed at me, and I was embarrassed.

Q: Did you see the great sights of Rome?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. Every Saturday we had a little group that went out on the town, you might say. A sideline for one of the men was doing tours, and he took a little group of us out on Saturday and then we ate someplace.

Q: This was an Italian friend?

CHIAVARINI: It was this man. I had loved it all.

Q: Was there anything particularly about Rome that you enjoyed?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I enjoyed all the sights of Rome. I thought no other city could compare with that. And I think I was right.

Q: We'll have to ask you to compare it to Paris later.

CHIAVARINI: Well, I thought nothing would compare with it.

Q: To continue with the discussion of Rome. Did you ever have an audience with the Pope.

CHIAVARINI: I never did.

Q: Did you see Pius XII.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: On the balcony, and at Easter?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I did. And my church had a little group that went to visit the Pope. So I went with them. That's how I got to see him.

Q: Do you have any impression personally of him?

CHIAVARINI: Well, he was better looking than the pictures the papers took of him. That was Pacelli. Then when the new Pope came, I also saw him. He was so different from Father Pacelli, Pope Pacelli. He seemed to be more Pope-like than I thought at first. Then I loved the old Pope more than the one that followed Pacelli.

Q: Were there any members of the embassy in Rome that you particularly remember?

CHIAVARINI: Well, yes. One was Freeman. He played the trombone. He would drag it out every possible time to play it.

Q: What was his position in the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: He had something to do with the political section. And his wife Phyllis was very nice; I remember her.

Q: What did the ambassador have you doing as his secretary?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, nothing really important other than the work of the embassy.

Q: Did he give dictation? Was his technique to give dictation and then you took it in shorthand?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And then I transcribed it.

Q: Do you remember any special issue that took up a lot of time and effort?

CHIAVARINI: No, I don't. It didn't. He was very good at dictating so I didn't have too much trouble.

Q: Where did you travel in Italy while you were there?

CHIAVARINI: Well, as I may have told you, I had a boyfriend in the military who had a jeep.

Q: Another boyfriend? The same boyfriend from Korea?

CHIAVARINI: No.

Q: But the same jeep?

CHIAVARINI: [laughter] Probably, I don't know.

Q: So where did you go while you were in Italy?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I went to all the places that a tourist would go. I loved it all. We went to ... a place in southern Italy.

Q: You did go to Florence, I imagine.

CHIAVARINI: No, not that far north. It was down south. It was overrun by communists.

Q: Did you see, Monte Cassino?

CHIAVARINI: No, I didn't. I don't think it was famous then.

Q: That was where the World War II battle was-at Monte Cassino, and I guess it was completely destroyed but it has since been rebuilt. But you didn't see that?

Was your friend somebody who toured World War II battlefields?

CHIAVARINI: No, he didn't.

Q: Did you get to Sicily at that point?

CHIAVARINI: No. I'd never been to Sicily until I went there on assignment.

Q: You had never been to Sicily until you were assigned there?

CHIAVARINI: That's right.

Q: Were you able to travel north to see family in Parma?

CHIAVARINI: Not until late in my time in Sicily. No, I went up to Florence and then up north from there. I thought it was the most beautiful country I had ever visited.

Q: Had you seen Venice?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Your tour in Italy ended in 1951. Then you went to Singapore.

After Ambassador Jacobs left Rome, you stayed in Italy?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Were you still the ambassador's secretary?

CHIAVARINI: No, I was down in Sicily as my own boss.

Q: Oh, you went to Sicily at that point.

CHIAVARINI: No, I was already there.

Q: You went to Sicily to go to the consulate there?

CHIAVARINI: I was in charge of the consulate. I was the consul.

Q: But that wasn't until the very end of your career, was it?

CHIAVARINI: Well, somehow or other I was there as the consul general most of the time.

Q: Okay, let's leave that and ask you about Singapore. Had you spent any time in Washington?

CHIAVARINI: I never served in Washington.

Q: Never served in Washington. After Ambassador Jacobs finished his service...

CHIAVARINI: He retired.

Q: He retired and then you became a foreign service officer after Ambassador Jacobs retired?

CHIAVARINI: No, I think I was already one, I don't remember when.

Q: Do you remember how it happened? How you were able to get the position?

CHIAVARINI: No, I never did know. I guess someone was good to me, in the State Department.

Q: You didn't have to take any exam?

CHIAVARINI: I did.

Q: Oh, you did. There was a time when you were in Singapore, in 1954. Do you remember being in Singapore?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I remember being in Singapore. It was not a happy experience.

Q: What happened?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I just didn't seem to get things done the way I wanted them done.

Q: What was the embassy in Singapore like? Who was the ambassador?

CHIAVARINI: I can't remember.

My roommate and I were invited by either the governor of Singapore or whatever he was. He was a Singaporean. I knew his wife and they invited me and my roommate to attend a British farewell party. I saw, for the first time, a man get drunk and fall over backwards!

Q: Was he a Brit?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. He was one of those who was leaving. He drank too much; they all did. It's a wonder they didn't all fall over backwards. I wondered about him; I thought surely he died. But I learned the next day that he recovered. I had never seen anything like that happen.

Q: Were you able to travel in Singapore and Malaya?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. We went to Malaya on a trip. I drove. My roommate and I went, but she didn't drive. So I had to do it myself.

Q: This was a period when there was a communist insurgency going on in Malaya wasn't there?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Was it dangerous?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I think it was. But I never knew that it was dangerous. I didn't read the papers enough or what have you. So I didn't know that there was that much danger. I remember coming back we followed the wrong group back. It was kind of late in the game when I finally discovered that. I remember trying to turn around, but then I decided I better go ahead with my original plan. I did and we got out of it all right. But I was pretty scared there for some minutes that I was going to be shot or worse.

Q: Did you have any Chinese friends in Singapore? Or were they mostly in the British and U.S. community?

CHIAVARINI: I guess I related mostly to the British.

Q: What your living circumstances?

CHIAVARINI: Well, we had a nice house in Lehman Park; where the houses were built for us. Anyway, I didn't linger over there too long.

Q: Were you able to live alone, or did you have roommates?

CHIAVARINI: I had to have a roommate. And that was all right. Jamie was from the south. She was very nice. I think she pandered to me too much.

Q: Really?

CHIAVARINI: I think so.

Q: Was she younger than you were?

CHIAVARINI: No, I think she was a little older. I never knew why. But anyway, she was fine. She told me that some dentist in Georgia had cured her of a jutting jaw. And he had corrected it with these, I call them sticks. She had to do that, go through her mouth all the time. She did that. I never knew why, but it all turned out well. Anyway, she didn't have a jutting jaw then.

Q: You were the ambassador's secretary again, Mary?

CHIAVARINI: I think so.

Q: Were there any issues that you remember in particular there?

CHIAVARINI: No, I don't. But I remember having trouble with our household help. Oh, I had the worst type of help you ever saw.

Q: Well, I don't want to tire you. Next I want to ask you about Warsaw.

CHIAVARINI: Oh, I loved Warsaw. I tell you, we still have in June each year a lunch with as many of those people we can find here in the United States. The citizens of Warsaw were really very kind to us. And we were kind to them.

Q: Poland, when you were there in 1955 and 1956, was experiencing a period of great upheaval in Warsaw and later in Hungary. Can you give me any sense of that circumstance?

CHIAVARINI: No, I can't because I can't really remember about that.

Q: Do you remember who the ambassador was in Warsaw?

CHIAVARINI: Let's see his name is rather a common name, Joseph Jacobs.

Q: What were your living conditions in Warsaw?

CHIAVARINI: Well, for a while I lived in an area where they had built households for the staff. I worked there; I lived in one of those. Then I lived in a regular house that was owned by the consulate. I had the worst staff you could find. I never could understand how they ever got hired.

Q: Worse than Singapore?

CHIAVARINI: Just about.

Q: You were the ambassador's secretary again in Warsaw?

CHIAVARINI: I think so, but I'm not sure.

Q: Were you able to travel in Poland?

CHIAVARINI: Again, when Lydia came to visit we went around I remember getting stuck in the mud. We had to get some of the Poles to help pull us out.

Q: Just as you were stuck in the mud in Czechoslovakia.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. It rained a lot.

Q: Did you have any interaction with the Russians?

CHIAVARINI: No. The only time I did, I took a trip to one of the neighboring countries. They had a party and they sat me next to the Russian. I don't know why.

Q: To give him a treat, Mary.

CHIAVARINI: [laughter] We had quite a time arguing about their country and ours. I like to think that I won.

Q: I suspect you did.

CHIAVARINI: Well, I don't know. But anyway,

Q: Was Warsaw badly damaged, still, in 1955?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I don't remember that it was particularly damaged.

Q: Was there a lot of construction?

CHIAVARINI: It must have been, but I don't remember.

Q: did you have any dealings with the Poles?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And we had very good dealings with them.

Q: Very good dealings/

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And they were very good to us at that time.

Q: You did not have a chance to go to the USSR at that point.

CHIAVARINI: I did go.

Q: Oh you did. Where did you go?

CHIAVARINI: I visited Moscow. And I did go out in the country and visited what they called their, the Russian collective farm.

Q: A collective farm?

CHIAVARINI: Oh no, nothing as wonderful as that. I don't know that I should call it "wonderful" but a lot of the people who worked there seemed to be awfully nice to us.

Q: Was this in a farming area that you visited?

CHIAVARINI: I guess so.

Q: Well, I'm going to wrap this session up and come back to you later with your tour in Palermo as a consular officer, starting I believe in 1958. You were a consular officer in Palermo for a stretch. That should be an interesting point because you now at that juncture a consular officer and no longer a secretary. I'm going to ask you how you made this transition and we'll arrange a new appointment for me to talk to you more about that.

This is November 29th. We're going to pick up with your experience as being a consular officer in Palermo in 1958. You've now made the transition from being a secretary to being a consular officer. I'd appreciate it if you would talk a little bit about that.

CHIAVARINI: Okay.

Q: What was it like to be a new consular officer in Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I enjoyed it in spite of the reputation that Palermo had of being full of problems. The people were very nice to me so I never felt ostracized or anything like that. They were really very kind to me. I met a lot of the locals, especially the women who were with the Soroptimist Club. They convinced me that I should join it; which I did. I used to go to the meetings. They listened to me if I had something to say. I usually didn't. You know the famous Giuliani was working around there too. I met him once when I went to visit him at his home which was just outside of Palermo. He was nice to me. I can't complain about anything that happened in Palermo.

Q: Do you remember any specific consular cases at that time?

CHIAVARINI: Well, there was a murder of an American citizen. I went out on it and also assigned a couple of other people in the consulate to go to certain areas to look for certain things. The murderer was an American who was visiting Palermo. He was driving around showing his Americanism by really putting it over the locals. He was the one who committed the murder. The police got him. Their success had nothing to do with me. But, anyway, that was the story on that. And I was a new consular officer so I was sort of wide-eyed about it all. Anyhow, the man was arrested and charged.

Q: Did you have to do anything special to get your new consular position.

CHIAVARINI: No, I didn't.

Q: You didn't have to take any tests?

CHIAVARINI: No. They just took me as I was.

Q: Were there other consular officers at Palermo at that time?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I remember one. Jean Smith, she was my boss, but she was the top consular officer. She was very kind to me knowing that it was my first consular post. There was something that she wanted me to be impressed about; but I can't quite remember it.

Q: This was your first time in Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: No, I was there in my first post.

Q: Did you have friends in the local community as well as the Soroptimist club?

CHIAVARINI: No, nobody that was close to me. But the Soroptimist people I really got to know them when I went back as consul general.

Q: Was your Italian and their Italian compatible?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. Because most of them spoke real Italian. Spoke the language correctly.

Q: What was your housing like there?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, it was very good. I had one in of the new buildings, and my landlord lived across the hall. They very nice, but they were very Sicilian.

Q: Did you have staff to work for you? A cook, a servant, a maid?

CHIAVARINI: Oh yes, I did, a very good cook. When I went back I hired him.

Q: Again.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: What were the concerns of the consulate? Were there political issues? Or economic issues?

CHIAVARINI: No, they were mostly personal. Each consular case individually. I don't remember anything in particular.

Q: Do you remember the consul general? Who was the consul general when you were there in 1958?

CHIAVARINI: There was nobody except Jean Smith. I considered her my real boss.

Q: Did you have any other responsibilities, such as for political reporting or economic reporting?

CHIAVARINI: I didn't. If I did any it was on my own. I know that Ambassador Zellerbach in Rome used to think I was great. Which was fine with me! I don't know why he thought that; but he came down to visit us a couple of times, and I guess I must have impressed him. I have a picture of myself at one of the meetings that he had in Palermo. It was just all very favorable.

Q: How was the local staff in the consulate?

CHIAVARINI: Well, they were all locals. They were very good except we had trouble with one of the boys. His English was quite good, and he was in charge of collecting money for consular services. He got into a little bit of trouble over that. I guess he couldn't resist. But he wasn't fired.

Q: Even though he had been collecting more than he should? Or, was he not turning over the money?

CHIAVARINI: He wasn't turning over the money. But I don't know why they forgave him.

Q: Maybe it was because his English was so good.

CHIAVARINI: Probably.

Q: Did you do any traveling in Sicily while you were there?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I did. I did it on my own. And then also, in some cases, I did it in relation to my position. There were several interesting places. One was a famous historic site. It was a Roman structure.

Q: A temple, a forum, building?

CHIAVARINI: Well, inside the building, yes. There was a historic place with a famous floor.

Q: A tile floor? A mosaic?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, a mosaic. People would come to visit it. I went, and I remember it quite well. As a matter of fact I went to see it when I first visited Palermo and then I went back after I returned. It was quite beautiful.

Q: Did you travel in Italy or elsewhere in Europe during this tour?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I went to England.

Q: England!

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I had a friend who was stationed in England so I went there to visit her. I remember driving in that London traffic and did all right.

Q: Well, you were certainly fearless if you were driving in London traffic and on the wrong side of the road.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And going around the circle and getting back into the right side of the road. But I managed and I didn't kill anybody. And I didn't have a wreck of any kind.

Q: Do you recall anything else of particular interest about this first tour in Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I enjoyed it as I did later when I was consul general. Members of my family came to visit me. Which was nice.

Q: Well that was fairly rare. You didn't have, as I recall, family members visiting you in other posts.

CHIAVARINI: Well, one of my sisters and my brother-in-law came to Palermo. My other sister didn't come. My sister, Ida, the one who is next to me in age, didn't come to Palermo. But my married sister and her husband came, and they were very happy to have been there.

Q: Well, after your assignment in Palermo were you looking for something different to have ended up in Monrovia?

CHIAVARINI: Well, it was different all right. Nothing with my having anything to do with shaping it.

Q: Did you ask for that assignment?

CHIAVARINI: No. I didn't ask for any assignment.

Q: You just took what you were given?

CHIAVARINI: That's right.

Q: Did you have the equivalent of the bid lists that we have now?

CHIAVARINI: No. No I didn't bother.

Q: Did you expect that you would be going to Africa after a European assignment - or was it a complete surprise?

CHIAVARINI: Well, it was a surprise. I didn't particularly like it, but I did all right. I think that was when the President died. Kennedy had been shot. I believe that I told you about. That was one thing I remembered about Monrovia.

Q: Did you go back to Washington before going to Monrovia?

CHIAVARINI: I never had an assignment in Washington.

Q: Were you able to go back on home leave after Palermo before going to Monrovia?

CHIAVARINI: No, I don't remember that I had home leave. Maybe I did.

Q: Do you remember getting to Monrovia? Did you go by boat?

CHIAVARINI: No, not by boat.

Q: Did you fly in then?

CHIAVARINI: I guess so. I don't really recall.

Q: Can you tell me your first impressions of Monrovia? I've never been there.

CHIAVARINI: Well, it's very African. I had an American clerk in the consulate when I got there. She didn't work out too well. Then I got this other girl whom I still see; she lives in Virginia.

Q: How nice.

CHIAVARINI: I haven't seen her recently but we exchange Christmas cards. She was very helpful, although she had never done visa work. I would help her with what papers to request and that kind of thing.

Q: Did you have friends among the Liberians?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, not many. The few I had came from the U.S. and helped to establish Liberia as a country.

Q: Did you ever encounter President Tubman?

CHIAVARINI: I did at social affairs. But I never had any formal dealings with him.

Q: Do you have any impressions of President Tubman?

CHIAVARINI: Just that we thought that he relied too much on what people told him. I would visit friends that I had made up in the rubber plantations, particularly the Firestone plantation. They were very nice to me. I remember one rainy Sunday I went out to visit them. Coming back, the girl I had gone with leaned out the door to tell me what was going on because I couldn't see.

Q: It was raining so hard?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. So she got soaking wet trying to help me. But I appreciated that. We stopped at one of the other plantations on the way back in order to get our breath. We got home all right. No problem, but it was an eerie experience.

Q: Do you remember anything about the embassy itself?

CHIAVARINI: The one lasting impression was the one I told you about. Not being allowed to represent my country at the wake for President Kennedy.

Q: The signing of the condolence book for President Kennedy.

CHIAVARINI: Right. I told you I resented it very much.

Q: I think you said earlier that you had told the ambassador that you resented that.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I did. He didn't say anything. He didn't really care.

Q: Did you socialize with the ambassador and other members of the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Well, maybe some of the other embassy members, but not the ambassador and his wife. She was quite a gal.

Q: Did you tell me once that they took you out to dinner?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, when I was in Paris. It always astounded me that they called and said they had arrived and asked would I have dinner with them at the Hotel Carillon. I was so flabbergasted I said, "Yes." And then that same evening I invited them to my house for a drink-not that we needed but it seemed to be called for. Well, anyway, they both are dead by now. So I hope they are resting peacefully.

Q: Did you travel in Liberia other than to the rubber plantations?

CHIAVARINI: Well, once I went to the home of one of the missionaries. She was one of the top missionaries. She had a place all set up for her. She was wonderful with the locals. I have a pot on my table in my living room that she brought me. She used to visit me here.

Q: Do you have any other impressions of politics of Liberia at the time?

CHIAVARINI: Well, they were like the politics here with the Blacks. I don't really want to go into that.

Q: Okay. Do you have anything that you want to say to wrap up Liberia?

CHIAVARINI: Only that I was glad to leave.

Q: Did you have to work with the Department to get the assignment in Paris?

CHIAVARINI: No. It just came.

Q: You didn't request it specifically?

CHIAVARINI: No.

Q: Did you know whether someone such as the Consul General Bill Buell was anxious to have you there?

CHIAVARINI: No, I didn't know that. If he were, I didn't know about it.

Q: Did you know any of the Embassy officials at the senior levels in the Paris embassy before going there?

CHIAVARINI: No. I just knew it was going to be nice.

Q: Did you go back to Washington before the assignment to Paris?

CHIAVARINI: No; I didn't.

Q: You transferred directly from Monrovia to Paris?

CHIAVARINI: Yes. Right.

Q: Okay. Well, why don't you spend a little time and just tell me your initial impressions of Paris. Of course, that's where we met. When did you arrive in Paris? You arrived in Paris in June of 1965, if I recall correctly. My wife and I arrived there about May or June of 1969. So you had been there and had a full range of experience before we arrived.

CHIAVARINI: I had a lot of experience with the young people because they were all into drugs. Some of the girls said they could fly. And they tried it, but they just ended on the ground, dead. I had one boy who had a fit of some kind in my office. I called his father in the United States. The father was not much help. He said, "That's just like him." I said, "Well don't talk like that about your son. I would like you to come over here and bring him home." He said, "Well, maybe he would." He didn't come and didn't take him home. He was so careless about his son. I just couldn't get over it.

I had another man who was a drunkard. He was a painter-and apparently quite a good one. Because some time later I met this woman in the United States, with my sister Polly, who was the wife of my brother-in-law. She gave us, one of his paintings. It's a lovely picture of a young girl. He used bother the hell out of me all the time. When I was the busiest, he would come in and want to see me for nothing. I would see him and listen to what his problems seemed to be. Well, anyway he took sick, and I called his wife on the phone and she came over. In the meantime, he had fallen into the river in Paris, or been pushed, I never was satisfied about that. But anyway, the police were satisfied, so what could I do.

Q: Did he die?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, he died.

Q: Before his wife arrived or after she arrived?

CHIAVARINI: She arrived after he died. I took care of her while she was in Paris. She appreciated that. That was why she gave me that picture and one to my sister. I always appreciated that. She took me to a large depository of his paintings. She was going to wait until he got famous to sell them. Which is all right.

Q: Yes.

CHIAVARINI: I don't know what she eventually did. I lost track of her. But it was always quite an experience with that man. He drove me nuts.

Q: Do you remember his name?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, Joseph Presser. His wife was Mrs. Agnes Presser.

Q: What was the Paris embassy like when you arrived?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, it was enormous, about four times bigger than the embassy in Liberia or any other place I had been. I grew into it as you know.

Were you there for, I used to call them les eventments?

Q: I was not there. They occurred in May of 1968. I didn't get there until a year after that. But before then I wondered if you could give your impression of the embassy and our personnel who were there?

CHIAVARINI: Well, none of them liked Paris. They all felt the French were terrible. I never felt that way. I remember another time, a friend and I couldn't close the umbrella as I got into the taxi. The two of us laughed our heads off, but he didn't care.

Q: Who was with you?

CHIAVARINI: The taxi man. I remember how much we laughed at the sight of me trying to close the umbrella and not succeeding.

Q: Well, your story also amuses me because it was in Paris when I first started carrying a collapsible umbrella all the time. You were in charge of the American passports, welfare, American citizen services.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: How did you divide your work with the visa section, which was in the Talleyrand building?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I let them be, and they let me be. Harvey Cash was the head of it.

Q: Was there any competition for resources? Having young officers, having support staff?

CHIAVARINI: Not that I knew of. Maybe there was. Maybe you knew more about it than I did.

Note: During May 1968, there were a series of popular disturbances throughout France. Originally stemming from "traditional" student riots; these "eventments" expanded partly fueled by general grievances associated with French high level education but becoming wider when labor unions, often communist dominated, sided with the students. There was a significant amount of rioting and barricade building with concern over French political stability. The French government offered various concessions to students, the police and security forces retained control with limited violence, and the disturbances ended.

Q: Were you satisfied with your French staff.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, they were very nice. They were very good. They didn't seem to harbor the same resentments that a lot of people seemed to have against Americans or foreigners in general. Anyway, I remember being there all during the period of May 1968, and I used to work late. One evening I worked until about 8 o'clock, and I walked home. I lived on the left bank. While I was walking, I met a French woman and I said to her in my bad French. "Oh, I'm so afraid that the French are going to go communist." And she said, "Don't worry; it's not going to happen." And it didn't. But I remember that walk home. Right today I can just see myself with that woman. She had sneakers; she was just like we were. I had read that a lot of people wore funny clothes, and she was into funny clothes. I don't remember exactly, but I do remember the sneakers. She seemed to be like the picture of what you would expect to see as a French woman. And she had the feel that they were not going to go communist and they didn't.

I remember one day de Gaulle disappeared, and we were all worried that something had happened to him. But nothing did. He had just not wanted to bother with the problem because he was sure nothing was going to happen.

Everybody asked me, "How do you feel about de Gaulle?" I said "I like him; don't talk to me about him; I won't listen."

I remember once he was driving by the embassy and I waved to him and he waved back. I was so pleased.

Q: What were the circumstances in the embassy at that time - when you first arrived before the "eventments" of May? Was the staff effective? Did you feel that you were integrated as part of the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I did. I really felt as though I was part of the embassy. I liked the work. I used to have my hands full of crazy people. There were young people coming in - and one of them like that young man having a fit right in front of me - falling on the floor and acting like he was nothing.

Q: Well I remember that there were endless people who had lost their passports.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Do you think that a significant number of those were frauds? People who had sold their passports?

CHIAVARINI: I don't think so. I guess I asked enough questions to each one so that I felt satisfied.

Q: Were you arranging assistance for a substantial number of Americans who were living in Paris for long periods? For social security payments or problems of that nature?

CHIAVARINI: No. We had nothing to do with that.

Q: Was Dick Rand your assistant for the entire period?

CHIAVARINI: I think so. He lives here, you know.

Q: I haven't seen Dick in 30 years I suspect. But I know you are in touch with him from time to time.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. And Phyllis, I can't remember her French name.

Q: It is Villegeurix-Ritaud - instead of Flashner - her maiden name.

CHIAVARINI: Right.

Q: Do you have an appreciation or any comments on any other members of the staff in the embassy, not just the consular staff but other officers, economic officers, political?

CHIAVARINI: Well, who was the girl in the passport section? I have a painting of hers.

Q: I don't know. In the passport section there was... the only American women were Phyllis and Mary Ann Mysenberg. Other than those two I don't know any.

CHIAVARINI: Well, so far as Mary Ann is concerned, I hear from her. She is in London. She usually comes over around Christmastime. She spends some time with her brother in Colorado.

Q: Can you give me more of a sense of what happened during the demonstrations in May of 1968?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I always tell this story: I waited, kept waiting for them to break in to my apartment. I lived out there in the left bank. They were organizing down in front of my building. I remember putting my fur coat on and my pearls and having an empty bottle so I could swing it over their heads if they came.

Q: Did you go to work every day then?

CHIAVARINI: I tried to. Yes, I did.

Q: Was there anything dramatic that happened at the embassy during that time?

CHIAVARINI: Well, if there was, I didn't hear about it.

Q: We're ending this session and will continue later.

This is January 10, 2008. We are resuming the session with Mary Chiavarini to move to her assignment in Palermo following her assignment in Paris and throughout during the 1968-69 period.

Mary, when I was last here with you we talked a good deal about your experiences in Paris during the upheavals of 1968. At that point we stopped and I will leave it to you to move forward from there.

Let's pick up from the end of your time in Paris. Where did you go after you completed your assignment in Paris? Wasn't this to Palermo? Can you tell me about your assignment as consul general in Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: Well, it came as a surprise. I was very happy of course, because I was consul general. I enjoyed myself there. I never had any problems with the mafia.

Q: Did you have any indication that they were operating in Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: Well, of course I knew they were operating but I couldn't do anything about it.

Q: And they didn't bother the American consulate?

CHIAVARINI: No; not at all.

Q: How was your staff?

CHIAVARINI: The staff was all right. Some of them were old-timers. And they were the ones that would give me a little problem, but not much. I enjoyed it.

Q: Did you enjoy travel in Sicily?

CHIAVARINI: I did. I did. I visited all the historical places-especially one up in the mountains. It was the historic place that had had old mosaics. These were Roman; they had these gorgeous floors. I went there several times, and I enjoyed that very much.

Q: Did you have and junior American officers there with you.

CHIAVARINI: Yes. I did. One of them wasn't so helpful. In fact, on his last efficiency report, he blasted me because it wasn't all that he had had before. The previous consul general had praised him to the skies. And I didn't find any of those qualities he attributed. As a consequent, he blasted me.

Q: Did he stay in the foreign service?

CHIAVARINI: Well, he stayed for a while. Then he left.

Q: You were a keen observer of your subordinates.

CHIAVARINI: I don't know whether I was a keen observer, but I felt as though I was.

Q: Was there any special issue in Palermo while you were there?

CHIAVARINI: Yes there was, but I can't remember too well about it.

Q: What was the general circumstance then?

CHIAVARINI: Even that I find it difficult to remember.

Q: Did you deal with the Italian authorities there?

CHIAVARINI: Once in a while I did. I was well received by them.

Q: Did you have the ambassador from Rome come down to Sicily?

CHIAVARINI: He came down once, but it wasn't particularly to see me. He did praise me. So, I guess I did all right.

Q: Were you traveling outside of Sicily at this point at all?

CHIAVARINI: No. No, I didn't.

Q: Were there any particularly interesting consular cases that you recall?

CHIAVARINI: Not in particular. The most interesting case when I was in Palermo was during my first tour when there was a murder of an American citizen. I remember going around with the consul to investigate it. We did pretty well considering. We found an Italian who was guilty. As I mentioned earlier, he was eventually tried and jailed.

Q: How were the relations between the consulate and the embassy?

CHIAVARINI: Well, all right I think. I don't remember that there was anything against us.

Q: Were there any political issues in play at that time that you remember?

CHIAVARINI: No, I don't remember that there were any.

Q: Well, the way I understand it, you spent five years in Palermo.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: What was your retirement ceremony from Palermo like?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, there wasn't any.

Q: Nothing!

CHIAVARINI: I don't remember anything. They just let me go.

Q: Well, do you have any final wrap-up thoughts on Palermo?

CHIAVARINI: No, I really don't. I really had no problems there. I came and I went.

Q: After you retired Mary you did a great deal of additional work for years afterwards.

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Do you want to talk about some of those experiences?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I can't; there was nothing that was memorable.

Q: Well, I understood that they used you as a troubleshooter?

CHIAVARINI: I guess I was. I don't know what to say about it. I often felt that maybe some of those posts, especially Saudi Arabia, they weren't exaggerated, the troubles there.

Q: What happened in Saudi Arabia?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I had trouble with some of the locals. The troubles were within the office and I finally had to go to the ambassador.

Q: Really.

CHIAVARINI: He helped me out. He fired them

Q: He fired them! That's a good way to solve a personnel problem.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I thought so. But they were sort of petty problems, I thought. But if they wanted to help out the problem they could have, instead of creating a situation where I had to go to the ambassador.

So I guess I didn't leave with a great deal of happiness.

Q: It was also mentioned in your notes that you spent six weeks in Cyprus.

CHIAVARINI: Yes, I did.

Q: What was that like?

CHIAVARINI: Well, that was very nice because there was a girl there that I liked, and we took several trips together-and they only made me like her more.

Q: This is an American girl?

CHIAVARINI: Yes.

Q: Was she in the State Department also?

CHIAVARINI: No, she was from the War Department. But she was very nice and understanding which I liked, of course.

Q: Why did they send you to Cyprus?

CHIAVARINI: Well, to clean things up. And I was glad to have that girl because she realized that there was a problem.

Q: What was the problem in Cyprus?

CHIAVARINI: Well, they didn't like the way I did things. But the trouble had started before I got there.

Q: What was the trouble?

CHIAVARINI: Well, the trouble was giving out visas. They didn't like the way I did it. But I did it the way the Department wanted it done, so I just went right on doing that. They didn't like it, but I couldn't help that. I didn't want to change to what they wanted me to do.

Q: Were there any other memorable assignments. I think you were in Ireland, in Dublin. What was that like?

CHIAVARINI: That was very nice. The people there liked the way I wanted to do things.

Q: Why had you been sent to Dublin?

CHIAVARINI: Because they were giving out visas without the usual care.

Q: But they were willing to accept the changes that you had?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, they did. So I was fortunate.

Q: Well that was good. Were there any other assignments that you particularly remember?

CHIAVARINI: Yes, there were.

Q: Mary, could you tell me about your assignment in Singapore?

CHIAVARINI: Well, it wasn't very exciting.

Q: Was this also an assignment where you were going to straighten out visa problems?

CHIAVARINI: No.

Q: Not visa problems in Singapore.

CHIAVARINI: No. I don't recall that it was.

Q: Mary, were you asked to do anything in the Department? I remember that Phyllis did some reorganizations of the FAM (Foreign Affairs Manual). Were you asked to do any work on the Foreign Affairs Manual?

CHIAVARINI: Oh, yes I did. I worked for Mr. Ellison. He was a paid consultant.

Q: And this was to bring the FAM up to date.

CHIAVARINI: I guess so.

Q: Do you have any summary comments to make about these assignments in retirement?

CHIAVARINI: No, I was just glad that they made them and I was able to help them. How, I don't quite remember but...

Q: Do you want to sort of wrap this entire oral history up with some general comments about the foreign service, about diplomacy, about life in the foreign service? Or anything of that nature that you might want to mention?

CHIAVARINI: Well, not that I recall. But I'm sure I had plenty.

Q: What was it like being a woman in the foreign service at that point?

CHIAVARINI: Well, I think it was fine for me. But I think a lot of people did resent women.

Q: Do you think that lessened by the time your career was completed? Or did you think that people were still hostile to women in the foreign service?

CHIAVARINI: I didn't think they were hostile. But some of them weren't very nice.

Q: Was that still true at the end of your tours?

CHIAVARINI: Well, no. I guess not because I'm optimistic that things would be different.

Q: Would you have any advice for officers, male or female, entering the foreign service today?

CHIAVARINI: Well, entering foreign service today, it's been 25 years since I retired. So it can't be much of use today. But I don't know what else I can say that would help you.

Q: It would simply be your advice to a young entering officer.

CHIAVARINI: I would say you better be aware what's going on around you.

In Singapore, I was very much aware of that. I knew what was going on around me, but I didn't know what to do about it. But anyway, I managed to get by. I was very happy in the foreign service. It wasn't all problems.

In Palermo I visited these old Roman ruins up in the mountains. I loved those old things. What else can I say?

Q: I think if you feel that you have said what you wished to, that's quite satisfactory.

CHIAVARINI: I mean that I made do with some of the stuff. And I had a nice young gal helping me out with the visa things, although I had to train her.

Q: This was where?

CHIAVARINI: In Singapore. And that's when I found out what the officers thought of a lady trying to work out some of the problems. They didn't think much of me. Because they didn't keep me on the job; in fact, I wasn't on the job at all.

Q: Well, Mary I appreciate all the time that you have devoted to this oral history.

CHIAVARINI: I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you real, real episodes.

Q: Well, again Mary all of the information that you have provided is insightful and will be useful for historians.

CHIAVARINI: Well, I don't know. I hope you're right.

End of interview