

Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project, MC 356
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Marguerite Marie Louise Kramer – class of 1963

Interviewed by Callie Kunz, class of 2023

September 22, 2020

Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Marguerite Kramer (PhD Economics 1963) was interviewed on September 22, 2020 by Callie Kunz (SB Computer Science/Neuroscience 2023) via a videoconferencing app, during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Kramer was born in Switzerland and raised in France, outside Paris. After high school, due to her language expertise in French and German, she began work as a translator. She later attended the University of Geneva to study at the Institute for International Relations there. Then Dr. Kramer applied to a program that would allow her to study in the United States and was offered a position studying economics and political science at MIT. While at MIT, Dr. Kramer was exposed to many of the most influential researchers in economics at that time.

After graduation, Dr. Kramer married and began teaching a class at the night school for the State University of New York in Rochester. Later on, she and her family moved to Connecticut, where her husband joined the Yale faculty. (Because of “nepotism” rules at that time, a husband would almost always get a full-time position but not a wife.) Dr. Kramer began teaching part-time at Yale’s School of International Relations and eventually developed a specialty in role simulation. She also began work as part-time managing editor of the Journal of Conflict Resolution. She later moved to California, taught at Pomona College, moved to the Bay Area and then retired. Dr. Kramer currently enjoys spending time outside and with her children.

KUNZ: Thank you so much for taking time for this call. I was hoping we could start with your early life: What was your childhood like? Where did you grow up? What was your high school like, and how did it prepare you for pursuing a university education?

KRAMER: Well, I am born the 22nd of June 1932, in Basel, Switzerland. My parents lived in Paris, but they were Swiss. My mother didn't want to have the child in France, so they drove [to Switzerland]. And I was born, basically, just after the border. [LAUGHS]

KUNZ: I see!

KRAMER: So that's the myth of my birth. I could have been born on the road—I think that's why I love to travel. [LAUGHS] It made the paper there because it was a harrowing trip. They didn't have freeways. I think it took them 10 hours.

KUNZ: Oh, wow.

KRAMER: They went back to France when I was three weeks old. Basically, for a long time, I just went to Switzerland to visit relatives. I was brought up outside of Paris, in Champigny, which was a small suburb for workers who went to Paris to work.

It had a round of little houses. It was not a fantasy suburb, but it was bucolic; it had a lot of greenery. It had about 25,000 inhabitants, which is small. Nowadays, it has 80,000—it grew after the war into a real suburb of Paris. As a matter of fact, now they want to integrate it into Greater Paris. It's part of that demographic change in so many other countries where the countryside becomes part of a big city.

My father had a factory nearby, and he bought the house that I was brought up in when I was a year old. It's called a Meuliere-style house. It's a stone structure, a special style that was fashionable around 1900s. It's called The Castle in my town because it has a little tower on the third floor. [LAUGHS] You can survey the whole landscape. But, to me, it was just my home. And, actually, I still have it. I have restored it, and I go now, since I'm retired, four months every year.

KUNZ: It sounds beautiful.

KRAMER: Being brought up there, up to the war [WWII], I went to public school. It was a wonderful experience. I loved school. Nobody had to tell me to study. We would get little stickers when we had good grades. At six years old, I loved to accumulate the stickers! [LAUGHS]

I just loved studying, and I soon kind of thought I would love to be a teacher. That goes back to that early childhood, I would say. They had a good public education, the French system. It was modernized in 1905, and there's no religion [in school]. It's very uniform. Everybody throughout France has the same program. It's just much more centralized than in the U.S.

Then, at seven, I was put in my grandmother's house in Switzerland because of the war. We kids were put outside of France for one year. I lived there with my grandmother, learned German, went to school to learn Gothic German writing. [LAUGHS]

But, you know, to me it was an adventure, so I didn't mope and cry because I wasn't with my mother. Really, when I think of it, the times were very difficult. You didn't know if you would live or if you would be bombarded. Parents wanted to protect their kids from all risks, and that's why we were separated.

KUNZ: You said you were seven when that happened? You were seven when you had to go?

KRAMER: Seven. Yes, in 1939, I was seven. And then I turned eight. My mother picked me up. I was alone. My brothers were at other places when the armistice was signed with France. We went back, and she put me back in the public school. But I had kind of forgotten a lot of French because I had German instruction.

KUNZ: Did you know German prior to having to go live with your grandparents?

KRAMER: No. I did not know high German. I knew a dialect which is spoken in Switzerland, but obviously it sowed some seeds, because now I'm certainly completely fluent in German.

In France, you had to pass an exam to go to high school, and that eliminated a lot of youngsters. Actually, I was the only one from my public school to pass the exam and to go to the public high school, which was not in the town. I had to ride my bike. It was two little towns further up.

So that was the way it was. The others stopped school at 14. And at 11, you had that exam. If you passed it, you were sent to the high school for seven years, so there was no middle school.

KUNZ: A seven-year high school? That's interesting.

KRAMER: Mm-hmm. A nice thing is that it was the whole cohort, somehow. You made the seven years with the same people. You're all young friends.

It was a very innovative school because it was coed. It was one of the first coed schools in the Paris area. It was vilified by some and glorified by others. But I loved it because it was fun.

I'd always been with boys, really. I was brought up with my two brothers, and I liked boys. I liked to play sports with boys, and that was fine with me. I wasn't dainty, in stockings and aprons like all the fine girls who went to Catholic school. [LAUGHS]

The high school was a good experience, again, even though it was huge. You had 40 to 45 students per class, compared to here, where we complain when there are over 25. And you did not really have any contact with the teacher outside of the lesson. Very different from here, too, although it has changed in France, too. But in my days, you did not talk to the teacher. You just did your work, and that's it.

KUNZ: Did you feel as though the work that you did in your high school prepared you well for going to university?

KRAMER: Yes, exactly. That's what I wanted to say. Yes. Again, it has changed. It's not that good anymore in France. But in my days, again, it's a uniform program, centralized. You have the same kind of books. We had a very good six years of Latin, not just a year—six years. Every year, for two or three hours. Latin was crucial.

I had English all the time. That was my first foreign language. And then at 16, you had to pick another language. I picked Spanish, so I did English and Spanish. And at the end they had a very, in those days, difficult exam which is called the [FRENCH] B-A-C. The bachot. My friend, it eliminated over 50% of the students!

KUNZ: Oh, wow.

KRAMER: Now, it is so lenient. Actually, they published the figures for 2020, and it was 90%. 90% got the bac. In my days, 50%, fsnot even. There was not 50%. We were, I think, seven in my class of 40.

KUNZ: Oh, wow. A very tricky test.

KRAMER: Yes. Everything changed since then. Now you have many more people go to the university. In my days, I mean, that's all you have. You have the bac. If you had the bac, you could register at the university, and you paid very little. Tuition was maybe \$100.

KUNZ: Very different from what it is now, that's for sure.

KRAMER: Yes, the public universities are still like that in France, but the private schools have now emerged, and they charge. Even when I went to the university they didn't have enough room. You had to cram in an amphitheater and sit on the steps and outside the door if you didn't arrive early enough to get a seat. My memory of it was just of being always crowded. And, certainly, you never spoke to the teacher.

KUNZ: Right. So different.

KRAMER: You never had any contact.

I wanted to have my degree in Spanish. I loved Spanish. I'd gone to Spain and I had loved the language, but my father thought that I had to improve my German, so he sent me to Zurich. My brother was 20, and was at a technical institute there. It is very good. So that year in Zurich I spent with my brother and his buddies.

When I was 19, in my language school a man came to test us, because the German federal government was created in Bonn in '49. They gradually had to develop their department, including their interpreter department—translators. This man was looking for people who spoke languages, and for some reason he picked me. Well, we had a test.

You know what simultaneous translation is? It's people like you have seen on the television and that. They have earphones on and a microphone and they hear the speaker and they translate at the same time.

KUNZ: Yes, I've seen that before. It's very impressive.

KRAMER: It's called simultaneous translation. You couldn't just translate after 10 minutes [had passed]; you would have forgotten [what was said]. You have to translate right away. This is a skill, and you get trained for it. That's what they were starting to develop in Bonn, Germany, so I became an intern. I was sent there, and I perfected my German. It got me involved in politics, because we translated the negotiations--

KUNZ: So this was your first real introduction--

KRAMER: --for the European community, in those days. It was in '51, '52. I became 20 years old.

This was fascinating, and it was a completely different vocabulary. I worked very hard there, because I had to really develop my language skills in order to be able to do it. We all were trained for two months, and then we started to work. We were sent to conferences. That really got me so interested in international relations, and I decided to leave and get a degree in political science.

KUNZ: Where did you go for that degree?

KRAMER: I went to the University of Geneva, because they have a program at the Graduate Institute of International Studies which focuses on international relations. Basically, I moved to Geneva for four years, and I was working as a freelance interpreter about a hundred days a year. That allowed me to pay for all my studies, so I was not dependent on my family.

The Institute was fun. They have the school of interpreting that's well known. I registered there, too, and got the degree. After all, I was already working as an interpreter, but I thought, "I need the degree, somehow." It was easy to do, because I already knew, more or less, the profession.

There I had English and German. I gradually gave up on Spanish. Spain was not a member of the European community, so they didn't need Spanish. But they needed German and English, so there are my languages.

KUNZ: Do you think you could still speak a little bit of Spanish?

KRAMER: I still have Spanish, and actually went to Spain many times. I'm still not as fluent as I was, but for me, it's not another language. First of all, it's very similar to French--

KUNZ: Right. I--

KRAMER: Did you study Spanish?

KUNZ: Yes. I did a Spanish immersion program growing up. Starting in kindergarten, our school was taught entirely in Spanish. The idea was that when you were younger, you learned it as if it was a second native language instead of through formal language studies. That was a lot of fun.

KRAMER: Yes. They now say it's much better to learn the language when you are a baby. Which is my way of remembering German, because basically my mother spoke 'schweizerdeutsch', which is a German dialect, and so it's automatic. You don't have to think about it. It's not a learned experience.

I always recommend to young families to introduce their kids to languages before they even go to school, if they can. Because the brain really is very much able to learn two or three languages at the same time. It's a big asset, because by the time you are 12 or 13, you are self-conscious. You don't want to pronounce something that's not your language. It becomes more of a struggle.

Anyway, I got my degrees in Geneva, and then I saw on the university wall a piece of a paper saying that you could study for a year in America. You had to apply through the government. It was kind of like a government exchange, and it didn't cost a thing. I thought, "Why don't I try?" [LAUGHS]

It was really a shot in the dark, and we were afraid that I couldn't get it, but I was picked.

I had talked to people [in the program] who were going to America, and they said, "Well, you are often sent to the boondocks. Nothing happens [in those places]. They were kind of putting the American education down. I didn't want that to happen to me.

I specialized in quantitative social science, which was beginning in the '50s, mostly in America, but we had already had some exposure to it. I had done an opinion study before, when I was in Geneva, a quantitative kind of modeling.

The first offer I got after six months was a possibility to go to New York, but I then got a letter that it was MIT in Boston. I didn't know a thing about MIT—I just went. That's where I went, because that's where they sent me.

So, in '58, I went to America on a boat. There were other students on the boat, so it was kind of fun. But I thought, "I's for a year and then I go back to Europe. I'm already enrolled in the PhD program at my institute." All I had to do was write the thesis, because if you have certain grades, you don't have comps. So I didn't have any exam. I had to have good grades, and all I had to do was write a thesis.

But I tell you what: We did not do research, really, in my academic European career. You went to the library in your section, but you didn't go to the big university library. We never had to write a research report. It was always a report on people that you had studied the works of. But we need to do research! Quantitative study is based on research. So it was a big stretch to say that that was going to be what I will be doing.

I basically picked it because it was modern, and it would be different. It would not be a year spent doing some similar type of studies.

I came to MIT in the fall of '58. And I then understood why I had been sent there. Because they had just created the Political Science Department, which was linked to the Department of Economics. [Political Science became its own department at MIT in 1965.]

The Department of Economics was near the center--

KUNZ: Under the MIT dome?

KRAMER: Yes, but on the side wing, watching the Charles River. The music room was downstairs.

It's been 50 more years, but I can remember it very clearly. That is really true—as you get older, in a way, you don't lose your memory. Memories just are sharper for things that are way past in your life.

But it's funny that it is so fresh. It's the madeleine of Proust, the taste of the cookie he had with his grandmother.

I can visualize the place where I arrived—I was sent to Bexley Hall. Do you know Bexley Hall?

KUNZ: I believe it is still a graduate student dorm on campus.

KRAMER: That's right. I was on the second floor, with two roommates who were in the Chemistry Department.

I had never been in such close quarters before, when you were just in two rooms. One was the dorm with three beds, kind of a bunk bed and another bed, and one was a little living room where each of us had a desk. We ate in the hall—opened a leaf table to eat. Otherwise, it was closed and so you could pass by.

We were basically living on campus and starting a very different life [than the one I'd had before]. We worked all the time, compared to Europe, where we went to movies and had weekends off. Here, you worked all the time. Really, when I think about it, frankly, it was like being in a nunnery! It was so intense.

And it was wonderful, because I love learning. I love learning. And it opened so many new areas. The most important thing I learned was to discuss things with the professors. Not to just repeat what they had said and get a good grade because you said exactly what they had said. I had a good memory, but that's not education.

Education is learning to think for yourself. That's a very different thing. You can know a lot of things, but more innovative learning requires critical thinking. That was wonderful.

At first, I tell you, I was paralyzed. You are six students in a room for three hours with a professor. He looks at you and says, "Well, you had 300 pages of reading. What did you think of it? [LAUGHS] You have to say something. You cannot just say "Uh..." [LAUGHS]

That was, at first, absolutely difficult for me. Within a year, I was as fluent as you hear me now, and it didn't matter. I was very much at ease, because the professors were very open. They were so accessible.

It was a different education. I had never had the possibility of actually exchanging ideas with professors like that [during my studies in Europe]. If I had to say what I learned while at MIT, this was the major thing I learned.

KUNZ: Which professor was your advisor when you were getting your PhD?

KRAMER: Daniel Lerner [New York University Ph.D. '48, Ford Professor Emeritus in Economics at MIT, best known for his work on Modernization Theory]. He had worked in Europe. He had done elite surveys in the early '50s—'54, '56 and '58. Basically, he needed a research assistant who knew the languages, because he had done his research in England, in Germany and in France.

And he was friends with Lazarsfeld [Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian-American sociologist who founded the university's Bureau of Applied Social Research], who was in New York. I guess that's why the news I'd gotten that I was going to study in New York got shifted to Boston, because this man needed a research assistant.

KUNZ: And you were the perfect fit because of your languages.

KRAMER: I really was. Linguistically, I was just perfect. But he [Prof. Lerner] was also really a wonderful person. His office was right next to mine, and he would come in and start a conversation.

You have to really have the nerve to accept that kind of exchange. Don't be afraid you're going to say something stupid. [LAUGHS] So there was a learning process, but he was wonderful.

This is the first year they had a program, so they only had 13 students. Thirteen students and about 15 faculty that had been hired or were doing other projects. Some were in economics, but we had, for the first time, professors from very different fields of the social sciences, including Erik Erickson [the groundbreaking German-American developmental psychologist, best known for his theory on the psychological development of human beings], who was a psychoanalyst and who has written books on Luther. I remember taking his class, and gosh, he said, "Well, do you want to come talk to me?" I said, "Oh, wow. A psychoanalyst is going to put you on the couch, want to find out about your life!"

But he was a wonderful person, if very distracted. He was not lecturing [in class], he was more like conversing. He impressed all the students, you can imagine. A psychoanalyst. We were very impressed by him.

He had us study the big men from a psychological point of view. I had picked de Gaulle, the leader in France at the time. Again, this was a completely new field. Even in poli sci, this was absolutely innovative. Opinions like these were innovative. Nobody had done that in poli sci.

It was basically a field of research, but of abstract ideas, more like philosophy or political thought. But we also had a lot of quantitative material, and we had game theory. Do you know about that?

KUNZ: Yes. Game theory is one of the more popular political science/economics classes that people take at MIT.

KRAMER: At that time, the MIT program attracted a variety of people from very different fields. I think this was such a nurturing environment.

There were about three of us girls among the 13. It didn't matter. Nobody treated me any differently, really. The only complaint we had was that there was no special john for us. [LAUGHS]

KUNZ: You mean a women's bathroom?

KRAMER: Right.

KUNZ: Thankfully, we do have our own women's and men's bathrooms. But that's funny that they only had coed bathrooms back then.

KRAMER: [LAUGHS] Yes—the beginning of women's lib! But at MIT, I personally never was talked down to or treated disrespectfully. And I have been an ardent feminist at heart ever since. It started as a movement in America, certainly.

Anyway, I did my dissertation there, and it took five years. It took five years for everybody. That's just the way it was. You had to spend about five years because you had to work for the comps for two years. You had to take classes, I don't remember how many. They didn't recognize anything I had done in Europe, so I had to start from scratch.

And then another three years to finish the dissertation, which was a long process. It was based on these interviews that Lerner had done. The name of my dissertation was "The Passing of Nationalism in Europe." I was very interested in the subject, since I had worked in Germany. But also, I was a European, I thought. I was a European. I wanted to have a kind of a community where the French and the Germans were not at each other's throat every century.

We were federalists, really, thinking that would be best for peace. That was my subject, and that was also the subject of Dan Lerner's interviews, so it matched.

KUNZ: The research that he had done?

KRAMER: Both. It matched both my interest and the professor's work, so it wasn't my own research. I didn't do the interviews. I worked on his interviews, but I acknowledged it, and he was glad I did.

Now you have to do your own original research—more than that. But in those days--

KUNZ: You could draw more on your advisor's work?

KRAMER: Yes. They were more lenient, or it worked differently. I would have loved to do research, but you need money to do research.

KUNZ: Right—funding!

KRAMER: So I was a research assistant. The last two years I became a teaching assistant, and actually, I taught that class for undergraduates in poli sci. There were about three poli sci students who taught it. There was a supervisor at the top and we had to report to him.

This was in '62, because I remember we had the Cuban Missile Crisis then, and I had to teach. I went, and we were all so nervous about that event.

But I loved it; I loved teaching. And I learned a lot, too, because you learn when you have to teach. Have to be sure your facts are correct. That awoke the passion of teaching that started me on my academic career.

KUNZ: Where did you go after you got your PhD from MIT?

KRAMER: I had married a graduate student in 1960. He was still writing his dissertation, but he got a job offer in Rochester, New York [the State University of New York in Rochester] in '63, after I graduated. I also had had my first child. I had a little boy, who was born in '62.

We went to Rochester, and my husband had a faculty position in poli sci at the university. Because of nepotism policies [where at that time, it was husbands in a married couple who almost always were given a position, not wives], I couldn't get a job there in the day school, but I got a position teaching political science in the night school for adults at the university.

I loved it. We would continue the discussions after the end of class. If I finished at 9:00, we would be talking until 9:30. Everything I had learned in America—including this kind of open door between the teachers and students—I put to use. It was a challenge, but I loved it.

The following year, the professor who was teaching international relations got sick mid-term. It was in February. I was in Florida with my little boy, and we got a telegram, "Please come to replace this man." Of course, I did. Off I went.

Then I taught part-time until we left Rochester in '68. It was great, again, I must say. I loved it. But I didn't have time for research, I was teaching two classes: comparative politics and international relations at Rochester. They were huge classes. There were something like 60 or 70 students. It was mostly the grading that took so much time.

KUNZ: The classes were that large?

KRAMER: They were, in those days. I don't know how it is now. That was from '64 to '68.

I was not in the faculty meetings; I was part-time. But I had a family, so part-time was fine. As long as they let me teach, I didn't care about the rest. But I didn't have time for research.

In '68 we left, because my husband got an offer at Yale. So we went to Yale, to New Haven. And Yale, again, was wonderful because it was also an open university. They had many more people from the administration come to give speeches. They had a program where they would stay four days on campus and have opportunities to talk to the students, which I thought was wonderful. There was a constant stream of outsiders, and you could just go to the lectures. You didn't have to pay. Often, they had a brown bag lunch hour. I loved Yale. I loved the atmosphere there for the nurturing attitude towards the students.

At first, I was pregnant with my fourth child. I was not appointed to a permanent position there, but they knew I had done teaching at Rochester, so I did teach in the evening.

There was a professor that was very nice, whose name is called Deutsch [Karl Deutsch, Charles University Ph.D. '38, Professor Emeritus of Economics at MIT, best known for his work on the study of war, peace, and communication]. He's no longer alive. But he knew me from before. He had been actually replacing Professor Lerner at MIT for a year. He hired me as an assistant. I did all kinds of things for him, including translating from German to English a history book that he was doing.

Anyway, Karl Deutsch was instrumental. He was a nice man who wrote a very good recommendation [for me], so I did get a position part-time in '72 at Yale. I was teaching every semester in the Department of Political Science.

My specialty became role simulation. You can call it "Games Nations Play." I got very involved in simulation. That was an interesting program that had been developed in Michigan, I think. It was like a kit; you could duplicate with your students' historical situations, then they play it out, and then have a post-mortem.

It was a complicated thing. And certainly, because I liked to do it, the others wouldn't touch it. It is very time-consuming for the teacher. It's not like teaching in a classroom.

Basically, you divide the students up into nations, teams of five, because I usually play it with 25 students, and then they go through periods of an hour and a half each. You would have something like five periods for two days to communicate with each other with pieces of paper. You couldn't talk to each other—you couldn't talk unless you had a conference.

This was designed to teach them about decision-making in the international sphere: what happens, how wars can occur, how do you try to get out of it, and how you negotiate. The students loved it. It was very time-consuming for me, but I loved it, too.

My kids also liked it. They were my messengers. One kid would bring the message from one room to the next. We did this on weekends. I always had more students than I could take for the game. Twenty-five was the limit. They would sacrifice two full weekends.

Have you heard of Model UN?

KUNZ:

Yes, I have.

KRAMER: Well, Model UN, in a sense, is a smaller simulation. You learn about a country, and the teams meet. Model UNs last a day.

But with my students, our personal Model UN was over two days, with about eight sessions of an hour and a half over the two days. You had a dynamic system—it evolved. The ease of peace evolved. We simulated World War I and World War II.

That was part of the course, just two weekends in the course, but it was fun. I know that it was a bit risky because you never knew how it was going to come out. You had to be ready to improvise. My kids have not forgotten it, and the students were wonderful. They had to write big reports afterwards.

You can see how this increased my relationship with the students. They would come to my office unannounced at any time, basically. A little bit disorganized compared to somebody who likes everything to be very formal. Mine was not at all a formal model. I'm not a formal person.

This was basically my academic life in 1980. That was Yale. I had started also a part-time position as managing editor of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.

KUNZ: That's an important publication. Could you share a bit about what you did as the managing editor, and the influence the journal had?

KRAMER: Well, I did that a long time with my colleague, Bruce Russett [Yale Political Science Ph.D. '61, Professor of International Studies at Yale and editor of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* from 1972-2009], who was the main editor. That was good, too, because I would basically be the first reader, weed articles out, propose which ones we should publish, and then correspond with the authors. Usually, any article was reviewed by two other independent professionals, like at other places.

The *Journal of Conflict Resolution* was very much in the quantitative vein, very different from formal political science.

I liked the freedom that I had. I could do it when I wanted, take it home. If I went to France to visit my family, the manuscripts were sent to France. We took a sabbatical in Belgium, and that was all handled through the mail. I kept that position until I retired, basically.

I think the language was very obtuse, often. It wasn't really easy reading, when I think of it. These are young people who want to advance in their career, even if it's not their favorite subject. Often, it was difficult to read, obscure, you know, not clear. I would try to improve it, even though English is not my first language. But I'd been here for many years, so I would have some suggestions.

In 1980, we left New Haven for a sabbatical in California. My husband had a position at Caltech, in Pasadena. A very academic place. Very generous. We had an enormous house rented out, and I loved the climate. California has beautiful weather, so I started to do much more physical things. We always had camped every summer. I was an outdoor person. But in California, it's really a lifestyle. You do a lot of outdoor activities.

I continued the journal job, but I didn't teach at Caltech. However, two years later, I got a call they wanted somebody at Pomona College for poli sci. That's an hour away. It's quite a distance, but I liked it. I liked the school, so I taught there for two or three years, into 1985.

Pomona is more sedate, not as lively as Yale, but had very nice people. The students invite the staff to eat with them. It's much more formal than Yale was, for me, but I continued my simulation games there. Our kids liked it, too.

In 1985, we had another move, to Palo Alto. It was a sabbatical for my husband, and then my husband got mentally sick, and my life was uprooted. He wanted to divorce me, so we divorced. And here I was: Should I go back to Pomona, where I had a position, or should I stay in the Bay Area, where my sons were in school? I had two at Berkeley, one was working in Santa Clara, and one was still finishing high school. That was a difficult year.

I did decide to stay here, because of the kids. I bought the house I'm living in now. That was in '85. That was a difficult year, but life has ups and downs. You have to just make do.

At that time, my father in France needed help, and so I went to France for six months of the year, and had my oldest son take care of my younger one. They lived together in the house I have now.

I became used to being in the house in France again, and saw my high school friends. This became, basically until he died, my life. I would just spend six months there and six months here. After he passed away, I inherited the house [in France], and so here I am, not wanting to sell it.

I have continued to do that: I usually now spend four months in France. It's the first time in 30 years that I'm not going to France. I am stuck because of the [COVID-19] virus. I'm now 88. I don't know how many more years I will have.

But I'm very interested in young people—I love young people. I'm not a person that dreads company, all this yammering. I don't want to go to a nursing home. I want to be with young people. I have actually nine grandkids!

KUNZ: They must keep you busy!

KRAMER: They're now going to college.

You have now had a whole life in half an hour. I don't know if it has given you an idea of who I am.

KUNZ: Yes, this conversation has been great.

KRAMER: Well, I don't know you physically, but I have enjoyed you talking, and your listening patiently to me. It must feel like old stuff for a young person! But I think we should have more contact between generations.

KUNZ: I agree.

KRAMER: We learn from young people, and young people can learn from us. We can see how things have evolved almost 70 years.

Personally, the war [WWII] changed my life. It was a time of uncertainty, of danger, but we were kids, so you'd just throw the bicycle against the wall when there was an alert and the alarm would sound in the town. That meant there was going to be bombing.

You could just go in the basement of any house for safety. Imagine the amount of trust that we had to have. Nowadays, my gosh, we say we are friendly to each other, but if somebody would barge in on your house like that, you would have your shotgun. It's interesting, isn't it?

I think times of difficulty can create great gestures of help and togetherness. That is actually, in a way, the positive side of having a difficult time, is that it should allow us to be closer to one another. This is a good time to say that we don't have that right now. I don't know where it's going to lead us. I'm thinking about that.

We had few things as kids. You know, you didn't compete on who had such-and-such brand shoes. Nobody had new shoes. Maybe one pair a year. But because everybody was in the same boat, it didn't matter.

I don't remember my high school, for example, being traumatic, compared to the same as young people sometimes report on their experience. I was a volunteer on a teen hotline in Palo Alto. And you know, these 13 and 14-year-olds would be in tears at the other end because somebody had criticized their dress, or their hair, or who knows. For girls, their weight.

We didn't have that. I don't remember that at all. I remember laughing it off, and having fun. There was no competition. Now, there is much competition, and young people have hurt feelings all the time.

The one hurt feeling I had was when I was eight years old, waiting in line at the bread store. You had to wait in line to get a baguette. And a woman shouts, "Rita, Rita." My mother called me Rita. I step out and I yell at her, and she bursts into laughter. "Oh, it's not you I'm calling, it's my dog." [LAUGHS] God, I ran home and I told my mother, "You gave me the name of a dog!" She just laughed. I've hated that name ever since! That's why I prefer Marguerite, which is really my normal name. Can you imagine? That's a hurt that you never forget. This is more like fun. She thought it was very funny. And I became red [faced], of course

Anyway, we all have some stories like that, and I think they make our lives a tapestry of different emotions. But we were laughing a lot as kids, and we had no toys. You just played robbers and cops. We didn't have gadgets, or iPhones and the plugs in your ear. Here, nature is beautiful. Well, you see a lot of people walk, because you're supposed to walk since all the trains are closed [because of the pandemic]. They all have hearing stuff in their ear and listen to something else. Why not admire nature as it is?

Do we need to be distracted all the time? I think it's good to keep your eyes open and look around you. Don't be constantly living in another universe. Besides, do you have to be in touch every minute with everybody? I love to be by myself. I don't think I need to be entertained all the time. I don't know. But it is such a different world.

KUNZ: I understand.

KRAMER: Did you tell me you are studying biology or microbiology?

KUNZ: Neuroscience and computer science.

KRAMER: Right—you have linked the two. Wow.

I don't know about artificial intelligence. If it's for the good, it's one thing, but it's something to think about, something your generation will have to decide.

There are so many other problems that require our attention, particularly global warming, my friend. I hope that you are involved in changing things so that we do limit our footprint on the world, because this has to be controlled.

KUNZ: Yes. I agree.

Again, thank you so much for speaking with me for this oral history project. It's been wonderful to learn a bit about your life, including your time at MIT. You came for one year and ended up staying much longer—and that seems to have led to a fulfilling career as a part-time academic and a journal editor, in addition to your role as a mother.

KRAMER: Thank you for asking me.