

SILVIA SIORDIA KJOLSETH. Born 1944.

TRANSCRIPT of OH 1993V

This interview was recorded on September 10, 2014, for the Maria Rogers Oral History Program. The interviewer is Maria Semprum. The interview also is available in video format, filmed by Akiko Tohno. The interview was transcribed by Susan Becker.

ABSTRACT: Silvia Kjolseth was born and raised in Mexico. She moved to the United States in 1965 when she and her husband, an American, were married. She has lived in this country for 50 years and in Boulder since 1971. She talks about the geography, climate, and culture of Mexico; the beauty of Boulder and how this city now is her home and a place that she loves; her medical education and her work as a doctor for Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains; and her involvement with the Boulder Public Library.

NOTE: This interview is part of a series in which immigrant members of the Boulder Public Library's English conversation class interviewed each other about their home countries and their experiences since arriving in Boulder. The interviewer's questions and comments appear in parentheses. Added material appears in brackets.

[A].

00:00

MS: Hello. My name is Maria _____ Semprum. I am interviewing Silvia Kjolseth. Silvia, she is a doctor, and right now, she is retired. Okay, Silvia. Where were you born?

SK: I was born in Mexico City.

MS: And how long have you been living in the United States and in Boulder?

SK: Well, in the United States, almost 50 years. And in Boulder 43 years of those—on and off, because I had periods that I went back to Mexico and lived, or we were in Germany for a couple of years. But in general, that's the numbers. Fifty years, and forty-three in Boulder.

MS: Okay, tell me about your country of origin. Where is your country and—[pause, after which interviewer asks a different question] Silvia, can you describe the climate and the landscape of your country of origin?

SK: It's very hard to say, because you really find all the climates that there is. There are deserts and forests and areas of very tropical vegetation. There are mountains, and some mountains almost keep snow all through the year. That's not the rule, but in terms of geographical, climatological variation, you really almost find everything.

MS: And in Mexico City, the climate—

SK: The climate in Mexico City is very much like Boulder without seasons. You see, some climate like this right now that we're having these days in the middle of September, it's very much like in Mexico. The air is dry, and it can be warm at noon, but it can be very cold and dry in the evening.

02:46

MS: In your opinion, which is the most beautiful place in your country?

SK: That is really hard to say. It's like we say in Spanish—I'm sure you know this saying—everything is the color of the glasses through which you are seeing.

MS: And in your opinion, which is the most beautiful, for you?

SK: It's very hard to say, because as I was telling you, there's all this variety. The states, for example, of Chiapas, of Oaxaca, of Veracruz—it's the largest, it's the side of the Gulf of Mexico, for example—they are beautiful states. They are very green with luscious vegetation, but the peoples in these states, many of them—also the state of Michoacán—are very varied. The amount of Mexican native population is—I don't know how many different groups of native population there is. But the states like Chiapas and Oaxaca—the variety is immense, really. And each one with their particular language and culture. So it's very hard to say.

Now in terms of what I like, I like a little bit of everything, really. Coming from Mexico City, I would say Mexico City is a very interesting city, very large—compared to Boulder, really you cannot compare it. It's the capital city of the country, and it's very cosmopolitan. You find beautiful things, and also you find—like many other places, but you really see there—you find extreme poverty mixed with extreme wealth. And I wish it wasn't like that. But that's the way it is. So Mexico City is beautiful. It's probably one of the most interesting cities in the world. I know many cities in the world—not all of them—but it's really certainly a beautiful city.

05:41

MS: I know in Mexico there are a lot of cultures in the country. But do you—would you please describe a custom that you think is the most representative of your culture in general? What one thing—

SK: Well, one thing that is pretty general is the strength of the family. I mean, you can see it everywhere. The other one is food and the schedules of food. Most everybody—probably still now—they have their main meal early in the afternoon. And especially during the weekends and all that is where people gather and all generations gather together for a meal and for the conversation afterwards. You probably know the word "sobremesa." That's very popular. But probably I would say the strength of the family, aside of so many varieties because of the different cultures.

07:00

MS: When and why did you decide to come to the United States?

SK: Well, I can tell you exactly. I met my husband in the year of 1964. This was in the summer, in Mexico. He came for—he was studying, his PhD, and he was writing his dissertation, his thesis, for the PhD, and decided to take some time off to learn Spanish. So he came to Mexico.

He was renting a room in these friends of my mother's home. My mother was a great canasta player, and she was invited to come to play canasta there. Before serving dinner, they called him. And they called me. I was studying for—I didn't want to be there—I had a pathology exam the next day. They called me and we ended up playing canasta and—anyway, that was the summer of '64.

And then we saw each other, and in April of '65, he called me on the phone, and he said, "Will you marry me?" [laughs] You know, he tells me there was a big silence, and then he asked, "Are you still there?" I said, "Yes. [said slowly, hesitently]" "Will you marry me?" And I said, "Yes." [said in the same way as first "yes"] I think that's when I decided I was going to follow him wherever he—

MS: And he was in Norway or—

KS: Oh, no, no, no—he is American. He was born in upstate New York.

09:08

MS: When did you come to Boulder, and why?

SK: Well, as I was telling you before, we married in '65, in July, after that call in April. And we—as newly married, we went to California, because that was his first position as assistant professor in the University of California, Davis. Essentially, my children, my two sons, were born in Mexico, because my parents were alive, and I had friends and one of the family friends was an ob-gyn doctor. So for me it was coming home to have the children, because I would be taken care of [chuckles], as I was, you see.

But then I came back to—each time we came back to California. And from California, then we came to Boulder in 1971 to reside in Boulder.

10:27

MS: What were the first impressions of Boulder?

SK: Well, it was a beautiful small town. Compared to Mexico City—or as I was telling you before, really, there is no comparison. It was just beautiful. Maybe comparing to California, in terms of the weather, it was a lot more beautiful to be around, with the changes. Now, it's hard for me, the snow, a little bit. Especially when it lasts too long—when you are in March of April and you still see snow, it's kind of tiring. But when you have little kids, the kids love snow. So compared to California with the tremendous heat during the summer and all that, it was

wonderful to be in Boulder. But then Boulder is a beautiful city. And immediately, you fall in love with it. Compared to Mexico City, it just doesn't compare in terms of—especially then, it was really a small city. You didn't have the traffic problems and all those things that you had before. I just loved it.

12:12

MS: And what are your favorite things to do in Boulder?

SK: Hmm. I have to say that when I first came to Boulder—and again, it was great for the kids to grow up here—from the beginning, to be in an area where they can be outside, where they can walk around and play around, and when there is bad weather, where you can go to a place like the library. I think I knew about the library from the start. As soon as I arrived probably. We had friends in the area before even we came, because my husband had lived here. So the library was a meeting place, really. But all the things in Boulder at the time—when it was mainly the central area. And things with the university too, you see. It was a place where we could take them swimming and all those things.

Now, what is my favorite right now? Now that I don't really care for swimming and all that—it keeps being the library and walking—even walking to the library and being in the library. And walking here in my area. Walking towards Chautauqua, to the backside of Chautauqua. I do that every day. It's just wonderful.

14:00

MS: And when you are out of Boulder, do you miss Boulder?

SK: I miss Boulder, I miss my home—the comfort of my home. The everyday life with my husband. And I feel so familiar with everything here. I know quite a big chunk of history of Boulder. So I frequently don't say, well—I have this accent of which I am proud—it's not the accent, I wish I spoke without an accent—not because I'm not proud of being a Mexican, but it would be nice not to be identified immediately. [chuckles] But an accent like that doesn't go away easily. But really, when people ask me where is your home, well, my home is in Boulder. And I miss it when I am away; even being in Mexico, I miss it.

15:12

MS: And how did you know about the library? And what does it mean to you? Tell me about it.

SK: Well, I guess I already started telling you, because I know that you come in part as a volunteer for the library. I have been a volunteer at the library. It starts from loving books. I've always loved books. My father loved them, and we had them all over in the house.

And of course, arriving in Boulder as I was telling you, with little kids, where do you go? Well, on snowy days you go to the library, and you go to the children's section of the library. At that time, in the '70s and '80s, there was a librarian—I think I haven't seen her in a little bit, but I'm

sure she's still alive—Ellen Tate. And she's the one actually—she became almost part of my family. Thanks to her, I met Ghada [Elturk]—ten years ago at least. And I met many other peoples through her. She was a really good resource, like Ghada is. But I don't think she was already working at the library. I don't recall when she arrived in Boulder. But anyway, the library really has been part of my circle from the beginning.

17:04

MS: And the last question: Do you feel that Boulder is home to you?

SK: Well, I already told you that.

MS: I want to hear again [chuckles]

SK: Yeah. No, it is home, it is home. The other thing is that, in Boulder, we have lived only in two houses here. One, just two blocks away. And when there was the opportunity for moving—to have a better "something"—or to have, for example, a garage in the winter, which is very convenient, I told my husband, "Well, I don't want to move away from this area, close to the library, close to Chautauqua and all that. So it was not a hard decision to say, I want to live wherever I am right now. So now, in this house, we've been already fifteen years. Time flies!

MS: Well, Silvia, nice to meet you, and it is a pleasure to talk with you, and—this is all.

18:30

SK: Okay. I would say that I would like to just add one thing. I think Boulder is just a fantastic place. And something that is really important is to keep aware of the things in Boulder that are important, and that's—for example—well, I would say, I was thinking about this in terms of what do I wish for Boulder in the future.

In pediatrics, you know, you always talk about growth and development of the kid. Talking about the child. And I think Boulder is still a child, in a way. We have to be—all the people that live here have to be really into trying to help the growth but also the development: the development of the culture, the development of the services, the keeping of services like the library and all the other institutions that we have around, including the university, the YMCA, the Chautauqua association, the concerts, the cultural life of the city. But always keeping in mind open space—you know, to keep a certain equilibrium between growth and development, and not just growth, growth, growth.

MS: And, I have a question, you can tell us about your profession—you are a doctor. Can you tell a little bit about that?

SK: Well, that's also part of my live for Boulder, you see. Of that, one of the institutions I consider the most important institutions for preventive care in the country—internationally, but in the country it's PPRM. You probably don't recognize what that is, but PPRM is Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains. That's an institution that is mainly dedicated to prevention

of many, not only diseases—prevention of breast cancer, with all the work about that; prevention of cervical cancer; but also prevention of non-wanted pregnancies; and prevention of—all sorts of education about preventing sexually transmitted disease and all that. It's really truthfully a preventive medicine institution.

You see all the time that I went through medical school that I started to mention to you, it's one of the things that they say is medicine should be not curative but preventive. When you go to medical circles here or anywhere, they still talk about that: medicine should be preventive and not curative. You should prevent getting sick instead of just waiting to be sick and then try to cure.

And again, I work for Planned Parenthood almost twenty years. I am retired from that for the last couple of years.

MS: Well, thank you very much, Silvia.

SK: Well, you're welcome. Thank you, thank you for coming.

22:44

[There is a brief pause, a break in the tape, and then interview resumes]

SK: Maru, you asked me how come I came to this country, and I was telling you about, because I met my husband. Well, at that time, this young, American person that we met playing canasta—he learned that I was studying medicine. At that time I was in the third year of medical school there—in 1964. And well, after we met and then we married the next year, I dropped out from medical school in '65. But my love for medicine was there, and that's something that I thought—I always had the idea that I would continue.

I didn't have that chance until the '80s—early '80s—1980. I decided that with all the support—I was already living in Boulder, we already had three children—and with the support of my husband—my father had just died, but my mother had a large home that helped me to think that this was possible. So I went back to Mexico to—essentially started all over—medical school—and I graduated in 1986, and I came back to Boulder with that MD title—degree.

At the beginning, I couldn't find a job. I was an assistant to a doctor in town. I was translating. I was keeping going to the library, by the way, because again, _____ encouraged me to start meeting other people. I met doctors in town. Until recently I was going to the continuing medical education courses that the Community Hospital offers.

By the way, my daughter was born—our third child—was born in Community Hospital.

And so, little by little, I got to learn about this institution—Planned Parenthood—and I took courses with them and with the Health Department in Denver. And I became a practitioner with them, with Planned Parenthood. [interference with the microphone makes the audio hard to hear for the next two sentences] And that job as a practitioner lasted for eleven, twelve years. And

after that I moved into the education department—preparing classes and teaching preventive medicine. [microphone interference ends] and teaching in schools, universities here in Boulder and in Denver. And the whole metro area, really.

And it was very satisfying work, you see. Teaching young kids or high school kids, or parents in lots of those meetings for parents. Talking about sexuality education—as much as we feel that our culture is so—here in the United States—is so open, it's really not. It continues in a double [?] you see. So that was really interesting. Interesting to me. And through the years it was very helpful to see my children under that point of view—of trying to talk about everything openly.

So, anyway, that's how I stick to that institution for almost twenty years.

I don't know if I answered what you want—

MS: Yes.

SK: Okay.

[pause: video goes black then reappears]

27:44

MS: How are you involved with the library in Boulder in this moment?

SK: How I am involved with the library at the moment?

MS: Yes.

SK: Well, I couldn't conceive not being involved with the library at this point. I try to go to two or three reading groups that the library has. The one that has been immense help in terms of education and knowing about other area of the world of which I didn't know anything about, is the Arabic book group. You see, I've been attending to that since—I remember very distinctly—it was 2004. The reason I remember is because I had gone to Mexico to take a workshop that Mexico was paying to involve people—Mexican or of any Spanish-speaking country—to involve them with trying to get their certification for elementary school, middle school, high school, whatever they didn't complete in their country—in a Spanish-speaking country. And if they happened to be like me, here—immigrants in the United States—to complete their certifications, with the help of the Mexican government. And I had all these materials that I thought the place where this could be developed more and more is in the library. So I went to the library with my materials—

Oh. Well, I called Ellen Tate, the children's librarian from way past when I started in Boulder. She had retired by that time. And I said, "Who could I talk to maybe start, or do, more of this programming of Spanish literacy and more development?" And she told me, "You have to contact Ghada Elturk."

So that's how I went to the library. And I met Ghada, and it was like immediately there was a connection there. She welcomed me, took the materials, told me about the different programs again that I had maybe lost a little contact with at the library at the time. And I just became again totally involved with the library.

Then, through her connection, she introduced me to other people in the different departments, and I was trying to do as much as I could to help the process of involving more Spanish-speaking people there. Or American people that come there to learn the language. You know, there is a quite large group of people that are interested in either keeping up their Spanish or learning more Spanish and getting more proficient with that. So, not on a regular basis, but trying to help when they needed a leader for the Spanish classes for American students. Or more of the interpretation for the Spanish-speaking people coming to the library, explaining to them about the services they could get there, the citizenship groups.

And translation. I really enjoy translation. So whenever there was need to translate materials from the library—I still, I'm happy to do that. They send me things through—maybe through Ghada or other people that Ghada has connected me to. They send me materials over the computer, and I translate them and send them back.

So my involvement continues. I try to attend all these wonderful reading groups. And I've learned so much about the Arabic countries that I never knew before—not only about the writers and all the area, but artists and culture—culturally speaking, all sorts of things. This coming Saturday, there is a Women of the West group. Two days ago, we had an Arabic book group meeting. So, again, I think people like Ghada Elturk are amazing. I could say many others, but again, like in the case of Ellen Tate, they have become almost part of my regular family.

MS: Thank you, Silvia.

SK: You're very welcome.

34:00

[End of interview]