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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Renata Cathou – Class of 1957

(interviewed by Catherine Bae)

February 1, 1996

ORAL WOMEN'S HISTORY PROJECT
FEBRUARY 1, 1996
INTERVIEW WITH MS. RENATA CATHOU
INTERVIEWER: CATHERINE BAE
PART II
LOCATION: ALGIER'S CAFE IN HARVARD SQUARE

Catherine: Ms. Cathou, after reading the transcription of our last interview, basically what is your feedback?

Ms. Cathou: It's been a while since I read it, so I'm trying to remember...

Catherine: Did it strike you that you would want to say more...

Ms. Cathou: Not about the things that you had asked me about.

Catherine: Did you want to cover more topics then?

Ms. Cathou: I think that it really all depends on 'what's the purpose?' of the information that you're trying to gather. Is this supposed to be concentrating primarily on MIT and its effects later on in life, a professional life? Or is there a desire to see a more rounded idea of life in general? Maybe you could answer that?

Catherine: In my opinion, it's a very broad interview. It can be whatever you make it out to be. But I think that the most important thing is for you to come across as a real person-- not just your accomplishments, but also the more personal side to you. Some examples are your personal opinions and feelings. For example, 'what did you think about this situation given the fact that you've gone through it?'. I guess it's about your stories and personal feedback.

Ms. Cathou: Well, I'm still not sure if there's anything that I can think of at the moment to add to the transcript. I guess what I considered when after I left you last time... there are a lot of things that we hadn't touched on such as other interests in life besides professional interests and science.

Catherine: Ok. Then why don't we start with that topic and then go back to some other questions I came up with...

Ms. Cathou: Ok. Well, my personal interests are mainly non-scientific and non-professional- very heavy interest in the fine arts, music, and opera. And, I'm not quite sure how to describe it, probably just an amateur interest- I've been doing it for a while- it is photography. My father was a professional photographer and so I always did a lot of photography. In fact, he gave me my first camera when I was five years old. I still have that camera...

Catherine: Oh really!...

Ms. Cathou: Yes... it's a little Brownie. I certainly wouldn't use it for pictures anymore. But, yeah I went back to that. I've been doing it for a long time and I enjoy it enormously. I've been told that I'm rather good at it, but you know....

Catherine: Have you participated in any art exhibitions?

Ms. Cathou: Well, I participated in an exhibition in Lexington. Other than that I haven't really tried to pursue that just yet. I might in later life, you never know.

Catherine: When you photograph, do you photograph friends and family, or do you concentrate on still life things, somewhat like Ansel Adams?

Ms. Cathou: I do a sort of combination of friends and family, animals... I've done a lot of the wildlife in my backyard, my cat (it's sort of like having a baby), a lot of nature though. And, since I travel a fair amount, I do a lot of photography when I travel. They're not documentary, I try to make them more aesthetic. So, that can be very time-consuming as well as very enjoyable. I have my own art collection, and I enjoy going to museums and looking at art very very much.

Catherine: Do you have your own darkroom?

Ms. Cathou: No, I don't have my own darkroom. I don't do my own processing. I have not done very much in black and white, I've stuck mainly to color. It's simpler to have it processed for you. For black and white, I've sent that out too. If I did considerably more of that, who knows? I might.....

Catherine: Yes, it's much more expensive to process black and white versus color these days.

Ms. Cathou: Oh yes! That hit me like a lead balloon...how expensive it can be because it has to be custom done. Nobody does it anymore. So, yes I would probably set up my own darkroom but that would require a lot of modifications to my house. That's why I've been a little bit hesitant to just plunge into that. So you've done it too?

Catherine: Oh, just a bit in high school. I always had an interest in the arts...but anything more than the piano was secondary.

Ms. Cathou: So you play the piano? I assume you're done it for a lot time then?

Catherine: Yes, for the first 18 years of my life that was my main focus until I came to the east coast...I still do a bit of playing...

Ms. Cathou: ...but, it's tough when you're in college. It really is, because I know I dropped off and I used to play the piano too...and I dropped off precipitously.

Catherine: Do you play still?

Ms. Cathou: I have a piano that I bought 10 years or so ago. I didn't play the piano for many years. But, I confess, have not put the time into practice, so at this point I've probably regressed to kindergarten level. But in the back of my mind... yes one of these days I would like to go back to it.

(coffee break)

Catherine: Are there any hobbies you have, besides in the fine arts?

Ms. Cathou: Well, I've developed this interest in gardening. I understand that that can be an all-consuming lifelong occupation for those who've done it. So, yes I could probably list that as a hobby.

Catherine: You said that you had started one and had finished the first stages, last time? Have you done more work on it?

Ms.Cathou: Not yet. It's that time of year when I have to start thinking about what happens in the spring. I will be doing some more and it's time to be thinking about ordering plants and designing. There's a whole section which I have not done anything with and I know I have to something with. I know I have to start designing that.

Catherine: Do you have a teacher for this, or do you just read the books?

Ms.Cathou: I've been doing a lot of reading, I've been doing a lot of looking. When I was out in the Pacific-Northwest for example, there was some wonderful Japanese Gardens out in Vancouver and Seattle....and so I looked at that. Very soothing, I might add. Something very peaceful about being in a Japanese garden.

Catherine: I guess I really don't know that much about Japanese gardens...

Ms.Cathou: Have you been to the Museum of Fine Arts?

Catherine: Yes...

Ms.Cathou: OK. Well they have a Japanese garden. It's admittedly a very small one. You can see it from the second floor windows in the west wing. It's really only open in the spring through early fall. And so, one can't always get in. But you get a good overall view. It's more of a viewing garden, than actually going in. But nevertheless, I think they've done a lovely job with what they have.

Catherine: In terms of your hobbies, you mentioned music and opera....what type of music are you interested in?

Ms.Cathou: Well, now it's more listening then, than actually playing. But for opera, I go to New York.

Catherine: Oh, you do?

Ms.Cathou: Yeah, the Metropolitan Opera. Last couple of years, I've cut back on my trips just because ...well, in the winter, it's getting tougher. Especially with the traffic jams around here, rush hour, and to get to the train, it's getting extremely difficult. But theoretically, the subscription I have, which I share with a friend who lives just outside New York, is for seven operas during the season. So, I try to get to at least some of those, and I've been doing that for at least ten or fifteen years.

Catherine: What started your interest in opera, going to them I mean?

Ms. Cathou: I'm not sure...I went to at least a little opera when I was quite young. My piano teacher in fact, when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen about... was the coach for what was then the New England Opera Company. And so, he was heavily into opera, and he took me to my first opera as a matter of fact. My parents have always been interested in music, opera...so it was just one of those things that was always there. When Boston started having opera performances again, in the seventies, I started going again.

Catherine: What did you think of the seventies?

Ms.Cathou: (laughingly) In what respect?

Catherine: Whatever...your gut reaction, feeling towards the seventies. It was such a historic period of time and my parents had just arrived in America, so they really didn't know what went on in mainstream America. They were kind of left on the outskirts, so it's always interesting to hear what other people have to say about it.

Ms.Cathou: I guess in the seventies, I was heavily immersed in my professional life. So, everything else is a bit of a blur. That was when I was at Tufts Medical School, I was actively a part of the faculty, and I had a large laboratory of graduate students. I was running off to scientific meetings all the time, and I was giving papers. So, I think scientifically it was a time of great change. Certainly, that was when genetic engineering came in and there was a lot happening. It was a very exciting time, I think in retrospect. There was a lot happening politically too, I think. Oh, there was the big oil embargo in the early seventies. I don't know if you were here then, that was the early seventies. This was in 1973, and we had great difficulties in getting gasoline....

Catherine: Oh, the big lines....

Ms.Cathou: Yes, one would spend hours in line at the gas station, and the gas prices went up. And this affected everything. We just weren't used this sort of thing anymore...that was a real shock. That made one stop to think about a lot of things.

Catherine: When you look back on your early career, do you look upon that as the happiest point in your life?

Ms.Cathou: The seventies?

Catherine: Well, perhaps not...but the height of your career.

Ms.Cathou: I guess that would be the seventies, in fact. Professionally, yes. Things were going well.

Catherine: What about in your personal life?

Ms.Cathou: Well, that was also the time of my divorce. So, that was also a time of great change.

Catherine: Did that affect your career at all?

Ms.Cathou: No, I don't think so. Well, in the sense that it gave me more freedom, yes. I could do a lot more things without having to think of going home and cooking dinner, for example. And, I did a lot more traveling. I took a sabbatical in California shortly after I was divorced. Therefore, my only ties back to the East Coast at that point were my graduate students. So, yes I had the commitment and responsibility of making sure that my graduate students were properly supervised-which I did by telephone actually. But other than that I felt very free. It's a very nice feeling.

Catherine: In reading the transcript of our last meeting, I was curious to know how you juggled such a successful career, with married life. You rose to such heights in the

academic world- you taught at Harvard and Tufts Medical School, your laboratory work, etc...

Ms.Cathou: I didn't have any children, that was the key. And, it was a conscious decision. Pierre and I decided that we would not have children. This was probably helped by the fact that he, I don't think, cared for children that much. So, he went along with my choice because I felt that it would be a great burden. I looked at people who tried to have both at it was clear, at least at that time, it was extremely difficult. I did not feel that I was a Superwoman and I couldn't do both. So, I consciously made the decision and he was very helpful in that respect. He did not try and push me into having children. And, I did not miss having children. I think I might at this point, looking back on it. But, I'm really not sure. So, that not having children I could in fact put all my time into my professional life. And, he had a fully consuming professional life himself. So, that in fact sometimes we were practically like two trains passing in the night. I mean, yes, I would take responsibility for preparing meals and that sort of thing. We did have a fairly active social life. We did a lot of traveling together and we were both in situations where we would not take vacations for a few years, and then we would take six weeks. We both juggled things so that we could do that.

Catherine: You both had very full careers, but on a daily basis did you have time to do things together? Was it very difficult just to find time every day?

Ms.Cathou: Yeah, but also we still did a lot of things together. In 1965, we bought a sailboat. In fact we did that after going sailing with some friends of his. I think the bug hit him originally, harder that it hit me. I just sort of went along with it at that point. It's curious, ultimately, I was the one who turned out to be the sailor. But we did that together, so that gave us a lot of communal activity. I have to confess, I found that frequently very stressful because he had a very macho attitude towards sailing. I found myself in situations where I was very frightened- physically frightened. He would insist on going out in conditions that, in retrospect, no person in their right mind could go out. But, I went because I didn't feel that I could say no. I just found that very stressful. I mean I learned to cope with these situations, but I didn't like it. So, I have to confess I had a lot of ambivalent feelings about a lot of this. I think that a lot of the stress eventually ended up in our relationship with each other- and what eventually ended up as divorce. There was no outlet for this stress that I had going.

Catherine: Was there ever a point where you wanted to give up your career, and stay at home?

Ms.Cathou: No, never. But I guess what's so curious about that is that I never felt so totally wedded to science that I worked thirty-five hours a day, so to speak. I always left time for something else, no matter how hard I worked. And, that created a certain amount of balance.

Catherine: For a woman, at that time, having such a successful career especially in a science field, was I'm sure pretty difficult. I mean you went to MIT back when there were fourteen women in a class of 100 to 200 men. Was there ever a point where you told yourself, this is just too hard?

Ms.Cathou: Yes, I had that. I had that periodically.

Catherine: What did you do about it?

Ms.Cathou: Well, when I was married I discussed it with my husband. And to his great credit, he supported me and he convinced me that I should not give up. I also had my parents. I'm not so sure how much I discussed this with my parents after I got married. I think I discussed it mainly with my husband. And, I may have, although I don't remember it, discussed it with some close friends. But, yes, there were times when I felt that it was really overwhelming. Somehow, I just got through them

Catherine: How did your female friends, in your same situation, feel about it?

Ms.Cathou: Well, I think they all felt this to a certain extend to. Basically, they just grit their teeth and would go on. And yes, they would allow that things from time to time would get difficult, but they would get discussed and keep going.

Catherine: So, most of your friends were pursuing professional careers?

Ms.Cathou: Not necessarily in science, but of some sort.

Catherine: You mentioned a couple of friends that you went to MIT with, and two of them actually dropped out, right? In terms of just college years, when they dropped out, did that make you want to drop out too?

Ms.Cathou: No, it rather encouraged me to keep going. But I guess one of the things that has always bothered me, in my own personal sense I felt very successful because I defined my own definition of success- which is, I think very personal. Which is doing what you want to do, when you want to do it, regardless of what the world thinks you should be doing in order to be successful. But in terms of a normal, male definition of personal success, looking around at all my male colleagues, who are still doing now what they were doing 15 to 20 years ago, while I'm doing something totally different, I ask myself was I successful or not. I'm not sure. I guess it's a question of what you define. I mean I changed as I went along. I did a lot of different things, I think I was very adventurous in that respect. If I didn't like something, I would drop it and do something else. So, I was exposed to a lot of things. Whereas, a lot of the more conventional people I know, have kept on going on what they're doing. And, they've risen extremely high in their field- the National Academy of Science....That's something I would have liked to aspire to, but realized that given my choice of how I want to do things, I would never be able to do. In that sense I was not successful. And that has, in a sense made me wonder, did I make the right choice?

Catherine: Well, what drove you to go on? Was it a passion for science? Or was it your trying to prove to the world that you could do it?

Ms.Cathou: I think it was a lot of the latter, to a large extent. "OK, now I've done it, what next?" But also, time is short. The older one gets, I think, the shorter it seems. I know I have a lot time to live because my mother is about to turn one hundred, next month as a matter of fact. And, so I know I have good genes, unless I happen to get run over by a truck. But, nevertheless I think that there's a sense of making the most of time. I've just been interested in a whole lot of things. And, if you keep a very narrow path, yes you become extremely good at that narrow path, but what's over here, and over here? So, I've been spending a lot of time in the last fifteen years or so, developing all of these other interests, which is very fulfilling....harder to describe, harder to explain....to you for example, when you ask me, "What have

you done?”. It’s very difficult to say, well I went from here to here to here. Cause it’s not that at all. It’s being able to partake and integrate from a lot of areas.

Catherine: These extracurricular....well,

Ms.Cathou: Which I guess you could call extracurricular, but which I do not consider extracurricular. I consider them very important and very mainstream.

Catherine: These interests of yours, now....are they rooted back when you had a full-fledged career? Or, you say fifteen years ago you realized you wanted to devote you life to doing this and this and that. Was it a sudden decision?

Ms.Cathou: No, it’s gradual. I think these interests go back, at least the germ of them, go back a long time. A lot of them I just wasn’t able to pursue at the time. I decided at that point, someday I would like to spend more time. That time has come, to a large extent for some of them. There are a lot more. I guess in a sense, it’s an exploration.

Catherine: You devoted, I’d have to say, most of your life to your career. You spent all this time and energy working at it, and trying to develop it and one day you retired. Do you look back and say, “I could have done something else with my whole life”, and be just as happy as I am now? In terms of, after working this long, do you have regrets about your career or about giving it up?

Ms.Cathou: Well, yes. There is a certain regret in not bringing that further and not participating in all the exciting discoveries that are going on right now. Yes, there is a certain regret. It has to be a bit vicarious right now. In a sense, I guess, I get this from what I consider my extended family which are my former graduate students and postdocs- who I still keep in close touch with, at least a few of them. So, I follow what they’re doing, which is quite exciting. I guess this in a sense a replacement for not having children because, well, they’re professional children if you will. So I see the process of what they’re doing in their scientific explorations. I also do a lot of reading. I haven’t dropped this, but I do it in a more general sense than trying to stay specifically in the area that I had to concentrate on.

Catherine: Is your interest still in immunology?

Ms.Cathou: It’s moved on. It’s more general....it’s more biochemistry than immunology. That’s going to color it...

Catherine: Is there anything you’d like to add?

Ms.Cathou: Nothing I can think of right now.

Catherine: Well, if there is anything, even an entirely new subject, please feel free to do so.

Ms.Cathou: I really can’t think of anything, so maybe we should stop here.

Catherine: Sure. This is the conclusion of the interview on February 1, 1996 at Algiers Cafe with Ms.Renata Cathou.