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Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Geraldine Kunstadter – Class of 1949

(interviewed by Jean Choi)

January 15, 2011

January 15, 2011: Geraldine Kunstadter

Choi: I am here with Geraldine Kunstadter, and it's January 15, 2011. We can start wherever you would like to begin, for example, where you were born, your childhood?

Kunstadter: I was born in Boston, but my family lived in Marlborough, MA. My mother's doctor was in Boston. That's why I was born there, but I never lived there. I lived in Marlborough, grew up there, went to the schools in Marlborough.

Choi: Public schools?

Kunstadter: Yes, public schools. I don't think we, actually yes, we did have one private school in Marlborough, St. Anne's Academy. I actually took piano lessons there, but I did not go to school there. And I went off to MIT in 1945.

Choi: So you went to public elementary school and high school as well? And then you went to MIT?

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: Do you remember the process of applying? How you decided?

Kunstadter: I remember applying, and the teacher at Marlborough High, the art teacher, had graduated in Architecture from MIT. And I always remembered the beautiful drawings he had in the art room, that he had done as a student. He was a wonderful man. And he encouraged me.

Choi: Was that unusual for the time? Because at that time...

Kunstadter: Well there were several other people from my class who also applied to MIT.

Choi: Did they all get in?

Kunstadter: Yes we all got in. It was wartime still.

Choi: What year was it?

Kunstadter: 1945. The war hadn't ended yet. Well, the war in Europe had ended in May, but the war in Japan had not ended. That didn't end until August. And so, we all went, and I started out in Aeronautical engineering. I had thought that I wanted to be an Aeronautical engineer.

Choi: Course 16.

Kunstadter: Yes, course 16. But I realized after I got there that was not really what I wanted to do. So, I went into Electrical engineering. I stayed in that until my junior year when I changed to general engineering.

Choi: What caused you to switch?

Kunstadter: I was in classes, and the war had ended. All the veterans came back.

Choi: What was that like?

Kunstadter: Well, they were all so far ahead of the professors. They had just spent the whole war being—radar specialists; they were so far ahead of any civilians. And I thought, I can't, I'm not going to try to...

Choi: Compete with them?

Kunstadter: Yes, it was just impossible. I decided general engineering was for me. That was actually the end of my sophomore year. At that time we were going straight through. They wanted us to graduate in two years and eight months.

Choi: That was how long the undergraduates had to graduate?

Kunstadter: Without any holidays, without taking any time off.

Choi: Oh my goodness, that sounds awful!

Kunstadter: Oh, it was terrible. It was very hard. I took some time off, and I did a lot of fun things at MIT. I was in several musical plays.

Choi: Did you sing?

Kunstadter: Yes, I used to sing with the Tectonian Dance Band too. That was fun. MIT was a very different place. If you were an engineer or whatever you were, that's what you studied. Everybody did the same first year.

Choi: What was the first year like?

Kunstadter: 8.01, basic Physics, Calculus, Chemistry, English, Mechanical Drawing...

Choi: Mechanical Drawing?

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: We do not have such a requirement these days.

Kunstadter: Well, we did Mechanical Drawing for two semesters. Then the second year was pretty much the same. We had another English course, and then after that they were all engineering courses.

There were only two elective courses. One was History of Art. One was Music Appreciation. And the other one was Art and Architecture. I took the Music Appreciation course.

Choi: Because you sang?

Kunstadter: Well, I just liked music better at the time. Although the other course, I'm sure was wonderful. But the music course was—we had a wonderful, wonderful professor. But that was all. Otherwise the courses were all engineering. It was very different from today. There was no such thing as studying humanities. There was no such thing. Humanities were those two courses. That was all there was.

Choi: Were the humanities classes really large then? Because there were only those two courses for electives and everyone had to take them?

Kunstadter: Well, yes, but everyone had to take them during their third and fourth year. So it wasn't bad. And at the time when I started, there were only 1500, 1700 students.

Choi: Overall?

Kunstadter: That can't be. There were 600, 590 in my classes. There were about 2000 students altogether. But then that was in June of 1945. By August of 1945, the war in Japan was over, and people started coming in. When I got there, everybody knew everybody; everybody knew everybody's names because there were so few

students. Then everyone began coming back, and that soon changed to 3000 students after a couple of years. I don't know what it is now, but it's very large.

Choi: Very large, I would say one class is at least one thousand-something. May I ask you about some of the social aspects? Do you know how many women were in your class?

Kunstadter: Oh yes, there were six of us in a class of 590.

Choi: Okay, then going back to your high school. When you applied, your Architecture/Art teacher encouraged you to apply because you were very intelligent...

Kunstadter: Well I was very good in math.

Choi: Wasn't it unusual or an extraordinary thing for a young woman to be applying to MIT?

Kunstadter: It sort of was, except there had been women since it started, sometimes only one in the whole school.

Choi: Because I had interviewed some alumnae before, and they had told me that they had had people who had discouraged them from applying to MIT, saying it's very difficult, and they didn't think a woman deserved to be an engineer. But you did have a teacher in high school who encouraged you.

Kunstadter: Also, they wanted students because the war was on, and people weren't applying. They probably wouldn't have pushed so hard for me during the regular times.

Choi: So when you entered, was it intimidating? What was the atmosphere like?

Kunstadter: Well, it was a little intimidating. There were no dorms for women. But there were two apartments at Bexley Hall, right across from school. That had four girls in each one.

Choi: Was that by coincidence?

Kunstadter: Those were the only two, and you had to apply, and I was lucky because I lived too far away to commute.

Choi: If not you had to find off-campus housing?

Kunstadter: You had to find off-campus housing, yes. And most people lived off-campus or they commuted. It wasn't fun. We had no social life off-campus.

Choi: What did you do during your spare time then?

Kunstadter: Well, I was lucky. I was living on-campus. We did lots of fun things together. There were four of us in the apartment and four in the other apartment. But there wasn't a lot for women to do because there were 30 undergraduates when I entered. 30 women undergraduates and 40 graduate students.

Choi: Did you know all of them?

Kunstadter: No, I think I knew all of the undergraduates because we had the Margaret Cheney Room.

Choi: Oh, you did.

Kunstadter: And that's where we hung out. There was no other place. Where did the Techtonians play? Walker Memorial. That was where the café, no the cafeteria was. There was nothing much for women.

Choi: Did you feel that wasn't fair?

Kunstadter: No, that was partially because we were so busy. It was a little unfair, but we asked to go there. They didn't tell us to go there.

Choi: Were the other male students kind to you?

Kunstadter: Some were, some were not. Some were furious when they got to MIT and found there were women.

Choi: Really? How did you deal with that?

Kunstadter: You would just ignore it.

Choi: I can't imagine that. That's incredible.

Kunstadter: They were really upset. People from the middle of the country somewhere, they came and found there were women. They called us, "MURGATROYDS."

Choi: Murgatroyds (laughs)? What does that mean?

Kunstadter: Yes (laughs), just a dumb name.

Choi: So you would just brush it off.

Kunstadter: Yes, you had to.

Choi: You had to be very strong.

Kunstadter: Yes, and some of the professors weren't very nice.

Choi: What did you do when a professor was not nice to you?

Kunstadter: I couldn't do very much.

Choi: Were they unfair to you directly to your face? With grading?

Kunstadter: Yes. Well, they couldn't grade unfairly. They had to grade what your grade was. But they weren't very helpful, some of them. Most of them were okay, but some of them were very mean. One in particular was very mean.

Choi: What happened?

Kunstadter: He didn't help me when I needed help. It was just horrible.

Choi: Did you look to other students for support? What kind of support was there for you?

Kunstadter: Yes, my fellow students in the class. When we had experiments there were no other women in the class, so I would have one of the guys as my partner, and they were always nice. I never had a problem with anybody in any of my classes, not the students themselves. I just happened to meet some students when we first got there freshman week who were very upset to find that there were six women in their class.

Choi: Wow. Because nowadays the majority is slightly...

Kunstadter: The women are in the majority, yes.

Choi: That's why I'm always surprised when I have spoken with some alumnae who have had a similar experience as you. You all have had to have another dimension of strength that my class or younger generations have not had to muster.

Kunstadter: It was very lonely. It was MIT. That's why my best friends became, well, I have one, I forget what she majored in, but she was an engineer—the others were mainly architects. And I am still very close with the architects. Oh yes, I've been supporting two projects in the School of Architecture and Planning, for a long time. One in Japan, one in China.

Choi: Wow, that's very exciting. How did that happen?

Kunstadter: They didn't build a dorm for women, but in 1946 they bought a house on Bay State Road, 120 Bay State Road, and I was lucky enough to get into that. There were 18 of us.

Choi: Was it co-ed?

Kunstadter: The house? Oh my god no (laughs). We had a wonderful house-mother; she was so funny. She was very old fashioned. Oh, she would have never been a house-mother in a co-ed house.

Choi: Were you allowed to socialize in the house with men?

Kunstadter: Well, in the living room. But usually there were other women, and we didn't socialize much there. It was just a house, and on the ground floor there was the dining room and the kitchen, and the living room, the drawing room. That was it. And so if you had somebody come by, it was kind of uncomfortable with all the girls coming through. We always went out somewhere.

Choi: Did you have to walk across the bridge to get to class?

Kunstadter: Or take the...

Choi: The shuttle?

Kunstadter: No, there wasn't a shuttle. A trolley? Or tram? Or maybe it was a bus. I can't remember what we did, otherwise we walked across.

Choi: With the wind blowing, sometimes it must have been very cold in the winter!

Kunstadter: It was very cold!

Choi: Did you make it to class on time everyday?

Kunstadter: I think so. I don't remember clearly. But we had a number of architects in the house, of different ages. They were wonderful. They were very different from the scientists and the engineers. The engineers and scientists were very single-minded. And the school didn't broaden them at all. Nowadays they broaden them, so you don't get these people who only know what it is they are studying. The architects were artists and creators, very creative. They did beautiful drawings, renderings of their projects. They were very creative. They were artists. They were very different. They just appealed to me. I thought of going into architecture myself. I used to help one of my housemates. It was pretty simple in the beginning, and then when it got more complicated I didn't have enough creativity to go on to the hard part. But I remained close to the architects. There was one young woman in the dorm. Her name was Li Ying. And she had just come from Shanghai where she had gotten her B.A. degree in architecture at Saint

John's University, which is now called, I will think of it later. She was in the School of Architecture, and she was the most extraordinary person I had ever met. She played piano, she did beautiful calligraphy, and she was an extraordinary architect, beyond anything which most people had seen. She demanded a great deal of herself and her friends. And she was bossy and funny and wonderful. She taught me some Chinese, which I remembered for the rest of my life. She and I became very good friends. We used to study a lot together. She used to take me down to Chinatown and tell the waiter to throw away the menu, and she would tell them what she wanted. We would have the most wonderful meals. She was there at MIT for two years. Then she went to Harvard for a year. By the time she finished it was 1949. Over the summer she didn't think she could get home to China, but she decided she wanted to go home.

Choi: Why didn't she think she could get home?

Kunstadter: Well, the war was on. The communists were taking control, and her parents' money was not worth anything anymore. They used to send her money, but it was barely anything by the time she got it. She had an uncle and an aunt. Her aunt was China's first trained woman architect.

Choi: Oh, it runs in the family!

Kunstadter: Yes, and actually, Maya Lin is a relative of the aunt, with the same family, Lin Huiyin. Lin Huiyin was a very famous woman in China. A very famous beauty. And she was China's first trained woman architect. She was also the aunt of my friend Li Ying. The aunt had married by the name of Liang Si Chung, from a very famous family. He was China's most famous architectural historian. The new government, when it came in asked him to set up a new department of Architecture at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Li Ying wanted to go work with her aunt and uncle. She had no money. She had to work her way back, thanks to her various classmates and department-mates who were from other countries; they helped her get across Europe. She worked as a babysitter, as a cook, a housecleaner, all the way across to get to China. It took her a long time. She got back in 1950. When she got back, her uncle told her she couldn't work with them.

Choi: Why?

Kunstadter: Because the aunt and uncle were working together at the university. The party didn't like nepotism. Two people of the same family was okay, but three was not. So she had to go work at one of the Beijing Design Institutes.

Choi: She must have been upset.

Kunstadter: She was because she had wanted to instill wonderful things in the minds of young Chinese architects. She wanted to design housing

for the poor Chinese. She had all these wonderful dreams that all came to naught. Then she just disappeared from view because we couldn't write. There was no postal service between China and the United States.

Choi: How did you keep in touch?

Kunstadter: We did not. No, we all lost track of her.

Choi: To this day?

Kunstadter: Well, no. I made my first trip to China in 1981. I was working with an organization called, "The Yale China Association." While I was there I had a strange happening, this thing that happened to me in Shanghai. It made me think that Li Ying must be alive. I thought she had died during the Cultural Revolution. She was very frail. She had many things wrong with her. I had just assumed that she had died. But I had this strange experience in Shanghai, and I just thought that she was alive. I could feel her spirit, and I would look for her. It took me about a year and a half, and I found her.

Choi: Wow, how did you find her?

Kunstadter: By asking a lot of people, "Do you know Li Ying?" or "Did you know Li Ying?" I worked with the U.N. through the Mayor's Liaison Office with the U.N. So I met a lot of the Chinese who were here. I was also working with the Yale China Association, with many Chinese people. One day I was taking a man to lunch, and he told me he had studied Architecture at Saint John's University in the 1940s. I said,

“Did you by any chance know Li Ying?” And he said, “Oh yes, we were in all the same classes.” I asked him if he knew anything about her. He said he had left China in 1947, and so he knew nothing about her. Then I asked him if there was something like the A.I.A., where all architects join.

Choi: What does “A.I.A.” stand for?

Kunstadter: The American Institute of Architects. You become an architect and you ask to join the A.I.A. It’s sort of a trade organization for architects. And he said he didn’t know, but he had a brother who was an architect who worked in Beijing, and so he would write to him. In those days there was no email. He would write to him and let me know if the brother knew anything about her. He called me about 10 days later, and he told me that his brother and sister-in-law were my friend Li Ying and her husband’s oldest and dearest friends.

Choi: Oh my gosh, this is like a movie!

Kunstadter: It is like a movie. Can you imagine? Of all the people in China. I got in touch with her, wrote to her, and I went to see her. By the time I found her it was 1983.

Choi: How did you feel?

Kunstadter: I couldn’t believe it. I got a very sweet letter back from her. I went to see her in Beijing. She asked me to meet with the architects from the architectural society. They all came and sat in a semi-

circle around me. And they all had sheets of papers from old catalogues. There were so many books they wanted. Their library had been decimated during the Cultural Revolution. They particularly wanted books—this was 1983—they were just beginning to see journals and magazines, and they couldn't understand how architecture in the West got from what they knew in the 1950s, because they closed down in the 1950s except for countries like Canada and Europe. But they weren't given a lot of magazines and through the various terrible movements they didn't get any information. They didn't understand how architecture got from what they knew in the 1950s to what they were seeing the 1980s. They didn't understand the progression. So, they asked me if I would fill them in with the books from the 50s to the 80s. I said, yes. Then I got home, and I almost had a breakdown, thinking how do I do that? I called an architect that I knew. I knew that if MIT had any extra books they would let me have them. I just knew they would do that. And I had a friend who introduced me to the woman who was the Head of the Architectural library at Columbia University. She was wonderful. She said, "Come up, you can take any of the books for deaccession, as many as you want." So I would get boxes at the post office, and big what they called "M" bags, heavy canvas bags, special sized, either a 1 or a 2, and special tags. And I would fill up the boxes,

make a list, and address the boxes. I put them in those "M" bags and took them to the post office. I would hire a student on work-study to help me do this, seal up the boxes and put them in.

Choi: Because there were a lot of books.

Kunstadter: Yes. Each box weighed anywhere from 20 to 40 pounds, depending on the size. So, I would have to get a taxi to take me to the post office. I had to drag those bags in and put them up on the counter to send them off. And I paid for it myself. I did that for three years, four years. Then my back gave out. I couldn't lift the boxes anymore.

Choi: You injured your back from so much lifting? That's awful.

Kunstadter: So we started to make—we have a family foundation. We started to make a grant. They could order books from Singapore from all the regular book companies; they had offices there. They could order the new books they wanted. So, we did that for a long time, many, many years. I would see Li Ying a few times. She became almost like a recluse. If you go to the architectural archives and ask to see the Master's thesis project that was done in 1948, it must have been June, I suppose, by Ms. Li Ying. Her family name is, "Li." You will see a design for a dormitory for women at MIT. She called, I have one word that isn't right, I can never remember which one is it. She called it, "A Humanized Mechanism for Mechanized Humans" (laughs). I told actually a professor at MIT, Alan Brody, in

the Arts. He's a playwright. I told him the whole story about Li Ying and me. I told him about this wonderful project she had for her Master's project. He went to the Archives to see it. And the young woman at the archives took it out and looked at it, and she said, "I'm going to send out an email to everybody in the department; I've never seen anything like this." He brought me a copy, and I brought it to Beijing, and I gave it to Li Ying. That was when she could still see. She's pretty much lost her sight now. She doesn't see anybody, she doesn't talk to anybody.

Choi: Do you still stay in contact?

Kunstadter: No, she doesn't stay in contact. She doesn't see very well. Her husband has a bit of dementia. He was a very famous low-temperature physicist. I tried—MIT wanted to have her for three months to be in the department of Architecture and just sit and talk with students. Our foundation, my husband and I, decided we would underwrite that and bring her over and pay for her stipend. MIT would give them a place to live. They would set her husband up at Arthur D. Little, in the lab with low-temperature Physics. He was really famous. He was the number two man in China; he traveled all over the world. And when I told her about this, she said, "Oh no, I couldn't do that." And I tried to push her a bit. She said, "No I'm too sick," or "I won't be able to do it." I tried several times. She kept saying no. And then I went to MIT for something,

and I went into the 77 Mass Ave. entrance. Then I suddenly realized. I walked into the Architecture department, it's right up there—when she was there, she was such a star. Every professor worshipped her, literally. She was very close to several professors—she would spend weekends with one professor and his family on the Cape. They all adored her, and they knew she was going to be the star of all stars. If she had stayed here she would have been more famous than I.M. Pei.

Choi: Wow, really you think so? I met the niece of I.M. Pei.

Kunstadter: And he's not as nice a person as she is (laughs). Anyway, I walked in, and I realized, when she was there, she was beautiful. I still have photographs of her. I gave them to someone, the few that I had. But she was still beautiful when I saw her. She was beautiful, talented; she had her future in front of her. She was going to be a great star. And then she went to China, and she accomplished nothing. She and her husband lived in a courtyard. Then the courtyard was taken away from them. Her husband was sent to the countryside. She was moved out of all the room in the courtyard into what had been a closet, a place to keep mops and things like that. For her bed, she had three slats of wood on the floor, with a towel over it. That was her bed. She had one straight chair and a small chest, and that was where she was living. No one in the courtyard was allowed to talk to her. Everyday she had to go

to her Design Institute. She would be locked up in a room with nothing to do, and no one would talk to her. She said the happiest time she had during the Cultural Revolution was when she was sent to the countryside to do hard labor. She was then out in the sunshine; she could do something. By the time I saw her, she had lost all her back teeth, and her front were discolored. She still had the most gorgeous bone structure. I have a photo of her which I'll show you.

Choi: That is so sad.

Kunstadter: One of her colleagues whom I got to know very well said to me, "Ms. Li, she dresses like a farmer." She dressed very simply in cotton trousers and a cotton blue jean jacket. Where other people dressed a little nicer, she never did. She was one of the "people." But it didn't work. She remained one of the people, but the people didn't take her in. She was "wrong." She came from a famous family, a wealthy family, an educated family. She had studied abroad. So, they treated her horribly. And so, if she came back to MIT and walked into that 77 Mass Avenue door, I believe she would have died on the spot.

Choi: Really?

Kunstadter: Oh it would have been horrifying for her. The last time she was there, she was famous, she was the star. Now she would come back

after 40 years without having accomplished anything. Without all her teeth.

Choi: That is really sad. You must have been sad because you were close to her.

Kunstadter: She was one of my architect friends. So, I've been supporting architecture since 1985. There's been a project with Tsinghua University and the department of Architecture there. Now they have a studio every year or every other year, and I give money toward that. It pays for some of the transportation for the students. Then there's one with Professor Shun Kanda, who is in the Department of Architecture. He does a project in Japan every year. I make a gift for that, for transportation for them too.

Choi: That's wonderful. So you have architecture very close to you in your heart.

Kunstadter: Yes, if I had been creative enough I would have gone into architecture.

Choi: Do you really believe that you weren't creative enough?

Kunstadter: Oh no, I couldn't have.

Choi: Did you decorate your own home?

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: Well, you are very creative and artistic.

Kunstadter: I know what I like. I have collected things for many years. My husband and I were married 54 years when he died in 2003. He was from MIT, same class.

Choi: Did you meet him at MIT? How did you meet?

Kunstadter: During freshman week (laughs). But then I never saw anything of him until my junior year.

Choi: That's so funny. How did that happen?

Kunstadter: (Laughs) He seemed so young. For years, even after we were married and had children, people would ask him for his license if we went to a restaurant and ordered a drink.

Choi: So he appeared young?

Kunstadter: Yes, he just looked as if he might not be 21. They never asked me.

Choi: So you happened to bump into him in a class?

Kunstadter: During freshmen week, you know, we were kind of milling around. In my junior year I was working on the Voodoo magazine. He was the editor or something or another. I was doing the jokes (laughs). We started to date.

Choi: Was it normal for women to get married while attending school?

Kunstadter: Some did.

Choi: Did you get married while at school?

Kunstadter: Yes, just before, I had taken some time off. It was just before John graduated, and I was going back. I had three more courses to do,

and I was going to do them during the summer. We got married in April, and by June I was pregnant.

Choi: While you were in school?

Kunstadter: Well, when I was going back to school. But I couldn't. With all four of my children I was sick for nine months.

Choi: Did they give you medications?

Kunstadter: No. Good thing they didn't, otherwise I would have children with terrible problems. I was living in Lynn where my parents were, driving into school everyday. I would have to turn around and go back because I was so sick. So I never finished the last three courses. I don't have my degree. Three courses short (laughs).

Choi: Because of your morning sickness!

Kunstadter: I then worked with GE on aircraft, gas turbine development for a year. Then we moved to—John was working at Brookhaven lab here—

Choi: What did he study?

Kunstadter: Physics. But he didn't stay in Physics. He did it just for a couple years. They wanted him to stay; they wanted him to get a Ph.D. because he just had a bachelor's degree. They said in order to stay in Physics you got to have a Ph.D., and he didn't want to. In those days back in the 1940s or 1950s, it meant pretty much 4 – 5 years. With just a bachelor's degree you had to do all your coursework for a Ph.D. and then write a dissertation. It would have been at

least four years or probably more, and by this time we had had one child after he had worked at Brookhaven lab for two years.

Choi: So after he graduated you moved from Lynn to Brookhaven? How did you decide? For his job?

Kunstadter: Well, that was his job. He was working on the first reactor. They brought it critical while he was working there. It was really quite amazing. He then decided he didn't want to get a Ph.D., so he went into the business world. We moved to England for a couple years.

Choi: Really? With all your children?

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: Did you have all four of your children by that point?

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: Did you like it there?

Kunstadter: Yes. I loved it so much that I insisted we buy a house there. We did. We had a house for 30 years there. I used to spend the summers there with my children until they got big enough that they wanted to do something else. Then I would go at different times and then I would let it sometimes for years, and then go and stay there after the tenants moved out. Then finally by 1994—I had bought it in 1964—I had done it long enough. It's hard to have a house so far away. Especially when you have tenants. It was just a lot of work. So, I sold it. By that time I was travelling to Asia a great deal for work.

Choi: What was your job at the time?

Kunstadter: I was, with my husband, running our foundation. We made it into an international foundation. I chose where we do our work. So it was China, then Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia.

Choi: How did you choose those areas?

Kunstadter: I had been serving on the board of the Yale China Association. I had made two trips with our president. I decided there were lots of things we could do for the architects and other things. Meanwhile we had had the Vietnam War. I had been very involved with meetings and anti-war/pro-peace things. And then I took a trip to Vietnam in 1992.

Choi: How was it?

Kunstadter: Amazingly wonderful. Vietnam is a beautiful country. And the people are beautiful. The people have enormous grace. They are just very special. They are very different from the Lao, very different from the Cambodians. There is just something very special about them. And they love Americans. They put that war, which they called, "the American War," they put that behind them. Whereas Americans still carry on in such a terrible way. We should have never been there. It was their own country. They could have solved their own problems and there would have been fewer people killed. It's true, the North didn't treat the South very well, but the winners never treat the losers very well. And now

everybody is all the same. There is no North and South, it's one's Vietnam. People are very different from the North and South. I love the people from the North. They are simply wonderful. They're beautiful. They have enormous grace. It's just something about the way they move and the way they are. We have done a lot of work in Vietnam. We did a lot in Laos. We don't anymore; it's too hard to work there. They're different. They're not as nice as the Vietnamese or the Cambodians.

Choi: So you chose Cambodia as well.

Kunstadter: Yes. I sit on a lot of boards. All different kinds of boards. I've been doing that for a long time. My first board was 1968, with a small college up in Vermont. Then we bought a house up there and spent a lot of time there. It is beautiful there. I have not gone back to engineering. I've found the things I am most interested in are international affairs and languages. I've studied French and Italian. I speak pretty good French. I used to speak beautiful Italian, but then I started to study Chinese.

Choi: How many languages do you speak?

Kunstadter: English, French, Italian, Chinese. My Chinese isn't as good as it used to be, because I haven't had a lesson now in eight years. But I still speak it when I go there; I talk to my driver. It's a beautiful language, Mandarin. I can't speak Cantonese. I tried but I can't

learn it. It's very different, and it's not pretty. Mandarin is beautiful.

Choi: The official language is Mandarin.

Kunstadter: Yes. I tried to learn Vietnamese, and I couldn't. It was as same as it would be with Cantonese. It went in my head and out. It wouldn't stay. I had no problems at all with Mandarin. I loved Mandarin. I loved learning it.

Choi: Can you read it?

Kunstadter: Yes, but since I haven't studied in so long, I have forgotten a lot of the characters.

Choi: Vietnamese doesn't have characters.

Kunstadter: No, but they have nine tones. They're different. Cantonese has nine tones as well. But they're slightly different in Vietnamese. And it's not as pretty a language. Mandarin is a beautiful language.

Choi: How did you end up here in the city?

Kunstadter: Well, my husband was working with a company in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1965...

Choi: Did you move with him?

Kunstadter: No, we were living in Chicago in one of the suburbs of Chicago. He was originally from Chicago. The company wanted him to move to run one of their divisions either in Nashville, Tennessee or in New York. Well, there's no choice with that. I was not going to move to Nashville, Tennessee. So we came here to New York and decided

since we had loved living in London so much, in the city, we decided we would stay in the city in New York, have the children in school here, and it was wonderful. We moved in here and have been here. I have been here since 1965.

Choi: It's a really wonderful location. The park is right here. The city has changed a lot?

Kunstadter: Yes, in many ways better, probably most ways, I suppose. They did destroy a lot of houses at one point in order to build hi-rise apartments back in the 70s, I think. They took down old houses and put up big buildings. Where the Asia Society is, there were two or three houses there that they bought, tore down and put up the Asia Society. That happened in many places where they would take a whole block down and build those big apartment buildings on 1st, 2nd, and 3rd avenues. Most of those apartment buildings that have been built since the 70s were all five story building with shops on the bottom. Those all came down one after the other and they put up a 40 story or 16 story, depending on which place it is, building. 16 or 17 is the regular height, but architects and builders buy the air rights. Every building has the air rights over it. So what they do is to buy the air rights over various buildings, and then they can go up beyond the 17 stories.

Choi: How interesting, I never knew that! So you buy the air rights over a building.

Kunstadter: The air rights over lets say five buildings, you can go way up!

Choi: Because there isn't a limit as to how high you can go?

Kunstadter: Well, it wouldn't be safe...

Choi: Someone told me that in Boston there is a much lower restriction than there is in New York and that's why there's so many high rises here.

Kunstadter: Yes, well we have so many buildings here. Trump has put up so many on 3rd avenue and over across the park. He put up a 90 story building right near the U.N.

Choi: Did you say you worked in the U.N.?

Kunstadter: I worked with the Mayor's Office with the Liaison Office for the U.N. I have worked there for going on 41 years. I call on new arrivals, new diplomats when they first arrive to see if they need any help. I answer their questions and help them settle in.

Choi: How did you get this position?

Kunstadter: I am a volunteer. A friend of mine was doing that, and I went for an interview, and they accepted me, and they have kept me on (laughs)!

Choi: So you travel a lot?

Kunstadter: Not for that, for my own work, yes. I go to Asia three or four times a year. I go to South of France as often as I can.

Choi: I hear it's very nice!

Kunstadter: It's beautiful. I don't like warm climates. But I don't go there past the midway of June through August.

Choi: Because it's too warm?

Kunstadter: Oh, and there's too many people.

Choi: Isn't it hot here in the summer too?

Kunstadter: Yes, but when I'm at home I have air-conditioning, and the buses are air-conditioned, and the taxis are supposed to be air-conditioned (laughs).

Choi: Yes they are supposed to be (laughs).

Kunstadter: Any place I go is air-conditioned, so it's a question of getting to a place. I don't do sports outside. I go to a gym every morning, and that's air-conditioned, so I'm fine here in the summertime. I don't like South of France past mid-June. Even the beginning of June, I prefer to be there in May. The first week of June is pretty much okay, but then the schools start to close, and then the families, a lot of people, the children, and everything is crowded. It's not fun for me. I love it in May. I was supposed to go there right after Christmas, but we had the blizzard. I usually go the day after Christmas.

Choi: Are you going to go this winter?

Kunstadter: I am going to go on the 23rd of February because my flight was cancelled on the 26th of December when we had the big blizzard here. If everything's alright I'll go on the 23rd.

Choi: Do you go with friends?

Kunstadter: No, I go by myself.

Choi: That's so exciting!

Kunstadter: I love to travel by myself. When I go to Asia I go by myself.

Choi: You're very independent.

Kunstadter: Yes I am!

Choi: Have you always been that way?

Kunstadter: Well, since we moved to England in 1960; actually I have always been pretty independent, but more restricted when my children were young. I didn't really come into my own until after we moved to New York. By that time my children were well into school, and I started serving on a lot of boards and organizations.

Choi: If we made a general pathway through your life, it's very interesting because you went to school, and we kind of touched on this before, but you went into engineering, and somehow your life has followed an international, architectural path. If you describe yourself, your passions would be?

Kunstadter: My passions are, that's hard to say. Music, travel, but most of the travel I do has a purpose. I'm not a great tourist. I like to go to a place and just kind of feel my way around to get to know it. I don't like to go on tourist trips. I don't do sightseeing well. I love travel. I love working with people from different countries. I love learning languages.

Choi: Do you like art?

Kunstadter: Very much so, art and music.

Choi: Do you think these are things MIT helped you with? Or are they independent of your experience there?

Kunstadter: They're very independent, but at MIT I learned to think a certain way, more analytically than one does normally. I remember once the first woman I worked for was the commissioner of the New York City Commission for the U.N. One day she got very cross with me because there was something that nobody knew. And somebody asked me, and I knew. It wasn't anything esoteric. It was just something I knew because of my years at MIT. She said, "You always know the answers to everything!" And she was really cross with me because I always knew the answers to everything, but it's just that I knew answers to things that a lot people didn't know because it was a different kind of education I had received at MIT. It wasn't that I was any smarter than anybody else. I didn't know some of the things that they knew. I didn't know the things that my English friends who were at university at England knew. They could quote authors of all kinds, and they could use quotations when they were just talking to people because that's what they learned to do. Well, at MIT we learned, I don't know what we learned (laughs), whatever it was that we learned, and the way we learned was different from at Wellesley or at Vassar.

It's not that you were any smarter, it was just different. I found that I was more interested in other things. I don't always read the Science section of the Times, but sometimes I do want to know more about something scientific. It's just a different education. I don't know now that it's so different. I expect that it is, because it starts out differently from most universities.

Choi: The requirements are very different.

Kunstadter: Once I finished at GE in 1949 I never went back to engineering. But I was glad that I had the education I did.

Choi: Do you regret it at all? Do you wish you had gone to a different school?

Kunstadter: No, I wish had had the opportunity to study languages and history though. Because those I find just fascinating in a different kind of way, and I'm sorry that I didn't speak—well I had studied French all my life. My French is actually quite good now. I've been concentrating on that for the last few years. I want to get my Italian back, so I will have to go back to Italy.

Choi: Were your parents very proud of you for going to MIT?

Kunstadter: I think so. My father died while I was there. He died very young. He was very proud.

Choi: That's a very rare thing that you had gone as a woman at that time.

Kunstadter: They actually had wanted me to apply to Wellesley or some place like that. Had I understood a little better what they studied

there—at the time English or Literature it seemed, I couldn't see myself studying that for four years. It just seemed a waste. But you know, now I think maybe it would have been good. But I had a very interesting life because I went to MIT.

Choi: Even though you probably wish that you had studied more languages and history, in fact, you do it a lot in your own time.

Kunstadter: Yes.

Choi: Are you children close by?

Kunstadter: Well three of them live in the New York area 40 minutes from here. Two of them work in Manhattan. The other one does a lot of wonderful things in her community. My two daughters actually both live in Bronxville, not by design but it just turned out that was the town they both like. And my son lives in Montclair, New Jersey. He works downtown near the old World Trade Center.

Choi: Is it a far commute?

Kunstadter: No, he takes a train to a ferry, and takes a ferry across to lower Manhattan and walks about 15 minutes, and he's at his office. My daughter works in Midtown. She takes a train to Grand Central, and I guess she walks up or takes the bus up to her work.

Choi: Do you stay very busy these days?

Kunstadter: Yes. I sit on a number of boards. I have board meetings. I work with a group of women from the U.N., and we have meetings. I'm trying to schedule one right now. I was at a tea yesterday. I have a

board meeting coming up on the 8th, a meeting of some of the people on the board who are working on fundraiser. I am the chairman of the board of one of these organizations. I have another board in Washington that is about to have a board meeting by telephone. All kinds of things like that.

Choi: You stay very busy! But you like it that way?

Kunstadter: Oh yes; I love it.

Choi: Do you have any advice for younger people who are trying to figure out what they would like to do?

Kunstadter: Well, I've spent, except for the years I spent at GE, I've worked in the not-for-profit world. I think that's why my life has been so rich. Because even though you don't earn as much money in the not-for-profit world, the people are incredible. The people who work in the non-profit world have a special wish to do good things for other people.

Choi: That's a good energy.

Kunstadter: They are wonderful to work with. If you're working on Wallstreet, what they call, "the night of the long knives," people aren't terribly thoughtful about other people. Everybody's trying to get ahead and earn more money than the other one. It's different in the not-for-profit world. If there's a way to use your talents and earn a decent wage—I don't say go and be poor all your life and not be able to afford to put your children through school. But I have

found that the non-profit world has some of the most extraordinary people I have met in my entire life. It has given me a very good life. The people I work with abroad in China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, they're just very different from other people. They have values that are so wonderful.

Choi: Thank you!

Kunstadter: I wanted to show you quickly, a photograph of Li Ying.

Choi: Is this you (*pointing to Geraldine in the photo*)? Oh my goodness you are so beautiful!

Kunstadter: This is from 1989.

Choi: Is this when you first found her?

Kunstadter: No, I had first seen her six years before that in 1983.

Choi: Was she older than you?

Kunstadter: She was four years older than I.

Choi: She looks much older, maybe because she had been through a lot. Who is this (*pointing to another woman in the picture*)?

Kunstadter: This is the woman, by the name of Wei Nai Chen, she was an architect too. They had both been in Saint John's University together. She designed interiors, so like restaurants, rooms in hotels, things like that. She had never left China. Li Ying, she designed everything. She was the one, she and her husband were Li Ying's oldest and dearest friends.

Choi: They helped you find Li Ying.

Kunstadter: It was her brother-in-law that I asked. He wrote a letter to her husband. She was so beautiful. She had the most beautiful high cheekbones.

Choi: Yes, it's just sad, knowing what I know about her, she looks very tired.

Kunstadter: Yes, and she had been very ill.

Choi: That's a great photo! I hope you can speak with Li Ying somehow again.

Kunstadter: She's her oldest friend (*pointing to Wei Nai Chen*), and Li Ying won't speak to her either.

Choi: You feel like she is a very big connection for you to architecture?

Kunstadter: Yes, architecture and China.

Choi: Is that why she means so much to you?

Kunstadter: Yes, but also because of who she was years ago. How she was— just a very inspiring person.

Choi: That's so important to have someone inspiring in your life.

Kunstadter: Yes, someone who makes you want to be better in your life. That's what she was like.

Choi: Would you like to speak about anything else?

Kunstadter: No, I don't think so. Just that I love what goes on in the Architecture department and the wonderful people working there. They are so wonderful.

Choi: Thank you so much!

Kunstadter: Thank you!