Laurette Tuckerman– Class of 1984
(interviewed by Jean Choi)
2013
We'll start at the beginning in a little bit because you were telling me a story about a blizzard?

Yes, in the year 1977, 1978. It was January or February of 1978. The schools and everything were closed for about a week.

Even at MIT?

It was huge. I was taking a year off, so I wasn't at MIT. But public schools and roads were closed. It was really a major blizzard. It's still talked about.

I've heard about a blizzard in the '70s.

That would be it. That must be it. I lived in Somerville, as I said. It's not that central, but still the snow was piled up by the mounds. Snow clearing trucks piled up the snow very high. If your car were under such a pile (laughs) good luck! Anyway I remember betting afterwards, maybe in March or so, whether a certain snow pile would still be around the first of May.

Oh my goodness.

I won! It was still around the first of May. On the first of May, the snow from that pile had not melted yet from the '78 blizzard.

That's horrifying! Did you have a giant pair of boots?

Oh yes. You know, and you felt strong. I'm sure you've felt special from the Boston winters.

Kind of, but a little bit tired of it.

It's a little much.

It makes you enjoy spring that much more.
TUCKERMAN: Yes. That's always the problem. Everybody likes snow and spectacular weather for a while, but in order to have snow in spectacular ways winter has to last seven or eight months (laughs).

CHOI: That's true. That's a realistic, good way of seeing it. If we could start from the beginning now, where were you born?

TUCKERMAN: New York.

CHOI: Oh, you're a New Yorker!

TUCKERMAN: Yes. I was born in 1956.

CHOI: Your family, did you have a mother and father and siblings?

TUCKERMAN: All that stuff, yes. I have a mother who was French, refugee during the War. So that kind of explains my being here in Paris. My father died 11 years ago. I have a sister, two years younger than me. I went to Hunter College High School in New York, which was at the time an all-girls school.

CHOI: I met a few alumnae who went there actually.

TUCKERMAN: From when it was a girls school?

CHOI: Yes.

TUCKERMAN: Oh really!

CHOI: Do you know by any chance...

TUCKERMAN: I don't think I will unless they were my year. But go ahead.

CHOI: Linda Sharpe. She graduated from MIT around 1970. I think she was the only black female in her class.

TUCKERMAN: I know Lynne Richardson, who went to MIT. There were a bunch of people my year from Hunter who went to MIT. There was Lynne Richardson, she was black. She became a doctor. She would have arrived at MIT in 1972. Then there was someone else named Irja Luoma, who was of Finnish ancestry and had a Finnish name. She herself grew up in the US. I said a number of people, but maybe just those two.
CHOI: I guess you didn’t cross paths with Lynne, but I have met people from Hunter.

TUCKERMAN: These people were women who graduated from MIT in 1976?

CHOI: I think she graduated around 1970. Anyhow, where did you live in New York City?

TUCKERMAN: Forest Hills, Queens.

CHOI: What was the community like?

TUCKERMAN: Practically everyone who went to Hunter came from Queens.

CHOI: Really? How about elementary school?

TUCKERMAN: I went to a local elementary school in Queens, called PS 220.

CHOI: Everyone always knows their PS number.

TUCKERMAN: I know. People always say, “Those New Yorkers with their PS numbers!”

CHOI: Did you grow up speaking English and French?

TUCKERMAN: Yes. That’s correct.

CHOI: What was your first language?

TUCKERMAN: I suppose it was French.

CHOI: You were bilingual at a young age.

TUCKERMAN: Yes.

CHOI: In elementary school did you favor math and science or at that point had you developed any favorite subjects?

TUCKERMAN: I think that I probably did. I don’t think I was a very conscious kid. I think of myself as having been kind of in a cloud, that I was born at the age of maybe 15 or so, 14, 15, 16. I think before I was what might be called a “nerd,” except that “nerd” implies something like an interest in science or something. I would just say I was kind of just passive, going along.

CHOI: But interested in...
TUCKERMAN: I don't know if I would say that I had interests exactly. Somehow I didn't have much of a will.

CHOI: Did you study hard in elementary school then?

TUCKERMAN: I don't think so.

CHOI: So you just did kind of what you were told?

TUCKERMAN: That's right. That's how I would describe it.

CHOI: Were you a good kid then?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, yes, a very good kid.

CHOI: How did you find yourself applying or taking the test for Hunter?

TUCKERMAN: Oh, that just seemed natural at our school. We were told about it. A bunch of people from my school went. I remember being on the subway coming back from the expedition to the test. I remember people going, "Oh that was hard! Oh that was really hard!" I didn't say anything because I felt it was easy and I knew you weren't supposed to say that. Then when I heard that I got in, I wasn't surprised. That's how I found myself going, but we were told about it in school. It just seemed natural.

CHOI: Did people tell you when you were young that you were smart?

TUCKERMAN: I guess they did. I suppose. In fact, maybe it's the kind of thing you get teased about. Another thing was that I spoke French at home. Also, my mother worked. She was a journalist in the United Nations. She was gone all day. The person who took care of us was a housekeeper. All the other mothers were at home with their kids, so I knew we were "weird." In retrospect my mother says, "Oh you were proud." No, I wouldn't say that. Now I am, but at the time I felt we were weird.

CHOI: How interesting. How about your father?

TUCKERMAN: My father worked for the City of New York in the Office of Collective Bargaining. He was not very identified with his job. He had wanted to be a musician, but as you know, such dreams usually don't work out. He wasn't bitter about it, but he looked
forward to when he wouldn’t have to work any more. He wasn’t a doctor or a lawyer or architect or businessman. He did this job because of course you needed to work to pay the bills. The one whose career was the family identity was my mother’s.

CHOI: So you grew up kind of in a female centric...

TUCKERMAN: A matriarchy. Definitely. It was only my mother who was French, but we had French piano teachers. We spoke French at home. We had a French housekeeper. My father was a Francophile. He had gone to France to study music when he was in his early 20s, and when he went back to New York he went and found himself a genuine French wife. He was very happy about that. That’s my interpretation.

CHOI: He was a New Yorker?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, born and raised. He loved New York. He would say you could go to a different restaurant every day.

CHOI: Did he play a specific instrument?

TUCKERMAN: Piano.

CHOI: Was your house filled with music?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, but that sounds happy. I wouldn’t quite have put it that way. It wasn’t unhappy, but we took piano lessons and as I said, I was a good girl. I would just do my piano lessons, and I practiced as I was supposed to. But I don’t think it was that pleasurable to me. Not unpleasurable either. In retrospect I’ve learned to like a lot of music, but not the kind that my father played and liked, which I suppose is no coincidence. A house filled with music sounds like a happy thing. Well, I would say it wasn’t happy, but it was more a heavy operation. It was just one of those things that grown-ups or I was supposed to do.

CHOI: With your mother then, being the matriarch, you didn’t grow up with this idea that girls should not study.

TUCKERMAN: No, no. Okay now, although it sounds as though my mother was my main influence, I would say in a lot of ways it was my father. My father was a very logical person. We would constantly talk about things. We would reason things out about politics or economics. He taught me about things like inflation,
marginal tax rates, what was Communism, etc. We would talk all the time. He was always very interested in doing that with my sister and with me. I remember very clearly, I was reading the Cherry Ames Nurse Series. I feel a little guilty about this because in some ways it's very politically incorrect and in some ways it's not. Because I said, "When I grow up I want to be a nurse!" My father said, "No, no, no. When you grow up you want to be a doctor."

CHOI: Interesting.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, very interesting.

CHOI: That was your home life so you didn’t really think twice about it. Were you affected at all by the outside society?

TUCKERMAN: No. A little bit but I think at that age—where I'm seeing this from the point of view of my own children—your parents give you a strong story, and you mostly believe what they say. Yes, you see that on the outside it might be different, but as for what your future holds, you think that your parents know the kind of world that you will be in, in which your choices will occur. Of course it depends on if you have very bad relationships with your parents, but still I would say that wasn’t the case, and with my kids I definitely see this when we tell them about what are the different possibilities for the future. We explain the world to them, and when you're 16, 17, 18, especially if you get into some high-prestige situation, you might well think, I know more than my parents about this and about things that my parents never knew about. I sort of did this because I still remember going to Hunter College, and we met with the guidance counselors who said, "It's time to apply for college." "Oh," said my parents. That's very different from what I've done here with my kids. I've been thinking about what were the possibilities from a long time ago, and it's not my system here in France. I've had to learn everything. The same is true of my parents. My mother was in her system, and my father said, "Oh, college, huh! Well you'll go to City College where I went." I said, "When you went it was different. Nowadays girls from Hunter don't go to City College." Again, politically incorrect, but very much this Hunter girl's view. In class, the girls would say, "You don't become nurses." Girls at Hunter would also say, "No we don't go to City College," because City College at the time was open admissions. We would go to an Ivy League University. I was good enough, etc. and maybe it would be something a little lower than Ivy
League, but something like that. "Private college, you mean?" my parents said. I replied, "Yes." Their response was, "Oh, okay, I think we can do that!" My father hadn't saved at all. He hadn't thought about it at all. (Laughs) It was a little odd. There I'm home from school telling them about the world, the world that I was being steered towards. That's right. I was telling them what was the conventional path for someone exiting Hunter with very good grades. They didn't know about it.

CHOI: Your mother as well?

TUCKERMAN: That's right.

CHOI: You are the older sister? So you were the one to lead the way.

TUCKERMAN: That's right.

CHOI: You came out of the haze at 15, and you were at Hunter College High School already. Can you describe coming out of the haze? Does that mean academically wanting certain things?

TUCKERMAN: No, it was making friends. It was having opinions, voicing opinions. Friends like me. More social, but yes, I don't know, it's strange but I really do feel that I was born in this late age.

CHOI: Did you like your school at the time?

TUCKERMAN: No.

CHOI: Why?

TUCKERMAN: Well, I had many reasons for that. I entered when I was 11, and I left when I was 16. I went to college when I was 16.

CHOI: Wow. How did that happen?

TUCKERMAN: It was a lot easier than you might think. I was always a year ahead. I was born in March. My mother, that's one of the things she imposed—both my sister, born in February, and I—she put us a year ahead in school. Again, that was very easy because we were in nursery school. We were supposed to enter the kindergarten, but instead at that school they had a first grade, so instead of going to kindergarten we went to first grade, thereby skipping a year. Then at the other end, at that time they were talking about closing Hunter. So there was a big panic what would people do with their senior years. Everybody
who could, graduated a year early. That was very easy. People already from past years had been graduating a year early just by taking an extra course or two at the Hunter College. It was easy to do.

CHOI: You had already been doing that prior to the panic?

TUCKERMAN: No, I think I maybe started to do that around the time of the panic. It's not as if they realized when I was seven that I should skip two grades and go from fourth grade to sixth grade. No, I skipped kindergarten, and I skipped senior year. I went to elementary school early, and I went to college early. Both of those things seemed very natural.

CHOI: You entered Hunter at 11. You were saying you didn't like it because?

TUCKERMAN: Then I liked it. I was happy. I was really proud to be going to school where it was special. I took the subway, meeting the new friends, singing the songs, doing all the things like we had cooking class, we went up high stairs, we were in an old building, there was a long history of it. It was special this and that. Just all the exciting things, like when you get a locker in junior high. You (laughs) feel proud! But then there were a couple of aspects when I was in high school that were less appealing. One thing that happened is that somehow, I don't know, people were growing up. It felt very much as if I were a little girl compared to other people who were growing up and being more worldly—standard adolescent stuff. There were the "in" kids and the "out" kids. It wasn't as bad as that, but I felt as though I wanted to be more with it, but it's not as if I didn't have my friends at my own level. Everybody can't be "in."

CHOI: I can identify with that. I remember feeling that way.

TUCKERMAN: Okay so that's generally. I can say two more specific things. People in general, girls, started talking about boys. We didn't have boys around. I said, "Who were these boys?" The response was, "Oh, around!" "Where'd you meet them?" "Oh, you know, here and there." "Like, where (laughs)?" I didn't know! Maybe somebody had brothers? I didn't have a brother. Maybe some of them were at church groups? I don't know, neighbors? So I felt out of it there. That's thing number one if you're at a girls school.
CHOI: I went to a girls high school as well.

TUCKERMAN: Did you? Where?

CHOI: Windsor, in Boston. So I understand!

TUCKERMAN: Yes, then you get it! I was going to say no one can understand it.

CHOI: Did you have a brother school?

TUCKERMAN: No.

CHOI: We had brother schools, but I was studying all the time, so I didn’t know where to meet boys either, and I was so awkward too, so I understand! Wanting to be in a co-ed school—that’s what I dreamed of.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, yes. I didn’t feel that way until I was 14. That’s a big bond to have been through that. Nowadays you only hear good stuff about girls’ schools, about self-esteem, etc. (laughs)

CHOI: It’s a completely different animal, being in an all-girls school. I also found that some of the girls, if they were the “cool” girls, because I wasn’t in that group, it was a little more brutal, I believe, just the competitive girl mentality. I don’t know if you felt that way.

TUCKERMAN: How would we know if we weren’t at non-girls schools? We wouldn’t know if the girls there were more brutal or not.

CHOI: I had best friends from elementary school—my friend here in Paris, she went to the local public high school so she didn’t encounter the same attitude. There was a different “mean girls” bullying. I think there’s bullying everywhere just because it’s adolescence, and it happens at any school, but I felt it was different in an all-girls environment.

TUCKERMAN: I wouldn’t have said anything like bullying. I wouldn’t put it that way at all. I wouldn’t have said anybody was mean to me. I just felt out of it. Partly I felt, kind of for good reason, that they seemed to know a lot of stuff and be more sophisticated, and I didn’t know how to. I don’t think there was anybody mean. There was nothing like that. We were all supposed to be proud of achievements. But I did feel lonely and out of place or something. The second thing, though (laughs), when I was
growing up, it was what’s called, “the sixties.” But what’s called the sixties really took place in the seventies.

CHOI: I’ve heard that.

TUCKERMAN: Everything you heard about, you know Kent State, which I just saw a picture from—not celebrating, but marking the massacre that was in 1970, the assassination of Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., which was in 1968. In the 1970s the Beatles broke up. 1969 Woodstock. All those things you talk about being in the sixties, the real sixties, like ’65, ’63, people were about the Vietnam War. People were marching for Civil Rights, but when people talk about the sixties and what happened there with food and love, blah blah, that is at the earliest ’68. I think it went on until let’s say ’74, ’75. Many people experienced—the university people experienced it particularly because of the activity in the big universities. We at Hunter were not only in New York City but we were in Manhattan and right next to Hunter College. So we were there with the school closings, with the demonstrations, with the bull horns. Marches on Washington. We were very, very involved in the what’s called the sixties and the protests against the Vietnam War in the beginning of Feminism and “Ms. Magazine” and people were wearing buttons.

CHOI: What was that like?

TUCKERMAN: I never think people can really answer a question like that because everybody has only one youth. People sometimes say to me, “Oh what was it like growing up in New York?” How would I know what it was not like? That’s my childhood. It was that. But then I’ll say, “You weren’t supposed to think about trivial things like meeting boys.” There had been a brother school for Hunter High — there used to be dances. But now, dances? That was for our parents’ generation. That was from the ’50s, who would do stuff like that? You were supposed to be—you weren’t supposed to think about math or science. Not because you were a girl but because it was Dupont that brought you napalm, that bombed Vietnam.

CHOI: I see!

TUCKERMAN: You were supposed to be wearing black and quoting Brecht. Especially if you were a girl, but still science in general was under some suspicion.
CHOI: Interesting! I hadn't heard about this.

TUCKERMAN: That's how I experienced it. I don't think that was just me. In any case even if it wasn't harmful, at least it was kind of frivolous in that period where you had to make the revolution. Math? It wasn't the viewpoint where you hear about looking at MIT alumnae achievements, and we're going to cure cancer, we're going to invent non-polluting transportation, or we're going to do this. No, math was the playing nerdy sort of thing. At best it was harmless and at worst of course it brought you war.

CHOI: At that point were you secretly wishing for math?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, by that point I was. But that was part of my nerdy persona that was interested in math, and I wished I could meet some boys. Everybody else was marching against the war and wearing black and interested in poetry and modern dance to express their big feelings. So that's my story of why I was not happy when I was 15 there at Hunter. I was eager to leave and get to the wide world where possibly science could be more respected, and there would be boys. What I didn't know then was that maybe I could be whoever I wanted to be. Indeed as soon as I got to college I was extremely happy, made a lot of friends, and I felt good.

CHOI: So you went to Princeton?

TUCKERMAN: My first year I went to Wesleyan. I don't think I was very well advised about college applications.

CHOI: I was going to ask if you were able to talk freely with your guidance counselor about your wishes.

TUCKERMAN: The one thing I remember they asked a series of questions: do you want city or country, do you want big school or small school, this or that? I said, "Well I don't really care about city or country. I don't care about big or small. The one thing is that I don't want to go to a girls' school." My advisor said, "Fine. Here's where you should apply: Mount Holyoke, Smith, Wellesley."

CHOI: What?

TUCKERMAN: Exactly. She gave me a bunch of girls schools. So apparently I had enough independence to not apply there, but I don't think I
really had a good idea of where to apply in particular. There were some fashionable schools that everybody was applying to that I shouldn't have applied to. I should have done it differently. So for awhile I was really unhappy about how I made a wrong decision. Later on, much later on, I took on the point of view that I became so happy in my final life that whatever led to it must have been good (laughs)!

CHOI: So you went to Wesleyan.

TUCKERMAN: Right. There were boys, and I made a lot of good friends of both sexes. I had a really great time, but it wasn't very pro-science at all. On the contrary I remember their saying, "Oh, you're going to take two sciences? Don't you need to be well-rounded?" Maybe it was three sciences. The idea of taking no science was considered, "well-rounded." You took psychology and sociology and history.

CHOI: They have a great humanities program there.

TUCKERMAN: Scientists had an obligation to take non-science, but non-scientists had no obligation to take sciences. I saw that two year ahead of me was a physics class which had three majors, or I think in fact one major. So I thought, that's the same thing. I felt that I would like to be encouraged in the sciences, so I transferred to Princeton. It's a longer story than that, but that's about the gist of it. So I went to Princeton where eventually I was in a very, very math and physics environment.

CHOI: How did you choose Princeton?

TUCKERMAN: Again, complicated bad advice, this and that, but we'll just say I ended up there and ended up in this real math and physics environment where people spent their summers reading math books (laughs).

CHOI: You declared your major there as math?

TUCKERMAN: Like many people, I couldn't decide between math and physics. I still remember I was taking classes for both. I remember when I was a junior taking statistical mechanics and thermodynamics, the pictures in my book being little brown balls and little white balls, displaying disorder, entropy and so on. I had learned how to solve Poisson's equations, so what were these little brown and white balls? I thought, this doesn't look very serious, and I don't understand what you're
supposed to get out of these brown and white balls. It seemed all confused. I dropped thermodynamics and ended up just a math major. I went on in math, and in Princeton they are big on pure math—most math was very pure at the time. Now I think in America I think there’s more applied math. I certainly was on the applied side. This institute that we’re in is a physics institute. My whole job, though my PhD is in applied math, all my career in France has been in physics.

CHOI: Interesting.

TUCKERMAN: I belong to the American Physical Society, and I publish in Physics of Fluids and Physical Review. I’m also a member of the Society for Industrial Applied Mathematics, which is “SIAM” for short. I would say I would have much more of an identification with the physics world, both in the US and in France.

CHOI: You were at Princeton, you were in math, and it was more pure math; were you happy studying that?

TUCKERMAN: I was happy.

CHOI: And you were working very hard?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, I was working very hard. I wouldn’t just say that. I would say it was hard enough that hard work didn’t suffice. You needed genius. There were hard problems, and I didn’t know how to do them! You could spend as many hours as you’d liked to, but you didn’t see the trick. There was a function that was discontinuous everywhere or differentiable at all these points. So something that went on through my life, again very politically incorrect, was that I had a boyfriend who was very smart and helped me. I feel all my life I’ve been drawn to—ever since I met boys—I’ve been drawn to intelligent scientific men who have helped me a lot. Certainly my own work is quite worthwhile, but I’ve always been helped by men who were smarter than me. That was always essential to me in that I can’t imagine being with someone who is not as smart and who is not in science.

CHOI: After Princeton where did you end up?

TUCKERMAN: Then I went to MIT.

CHOI: You didn’t take any time in between off?
TUCKERMAN: I took some years off. My first year at MIT I was unhappy for a number of reasons. The boyfriend that I had mentioned had left me for a friend of mine, and they were living next door, and it was terrible. It was traumatic and difficult stuff, so between that and some general atmosphere of, "Oh you should take the time off and discover yourself," I decided to take a year in Boston. I worked at a consulting company. I did take a year and a half off. At first I worked at Charles River Associates, an energy transportation company, and then I worked at the Harvard School of Public Health.

CHOI: You came with your boyfriend to Cambridge?

TUCKERMAN: So it seemed. He was already going to graduate school (laughs). We broke up immediately, practically, during the first week of September. It was hard, but that's life! You have to go through stuff.

CHOI: I definitely agree. You were working at Harvard School of Public Health. What were you doing?

TUCKERMAN: First I worked at Charles River Associates. They had these models. I've never known what the word, "model" meant. I should, I'm in applied math. But I still don't know what "model" means. But they had these models, which were these set of equations of computer programs for coal mining and bus preference and getting people to switch to whatever mode of transportation. We were in Cambridge and living in a kind of hippie life, and they wanted to encourage people to take public transportation. So what would it take? On the other hand, all the people working there, the senior people, they all took cars to work (laughs). So it seemed (laughs), I don't know! It didn't seem very clean to me, not after all the math and physics I had. I remember working on things where there were surveys in which 12 people had answered or something like that. You were supposed to fit the models, and I didn't have any confidence.

CHOI: Why?

TUCKERMAN: No I don't mean in myself, I mean in what I was supposed to do. I didn't feel that it was the truth that came from God or that we were being taught in school. This seemed like just making it up as you went along.

CHOI: Okay, I see.
TUCKERMAN: So I left there, and I went to the Harvard School of Public Health, which didn’t seem like that. There I worked on statistical programming. My boss was very nice, a very bright person who had, I guess, a math master’s or something. She was very attached to her husband who was a doctor or medical researcher. She said, “I feel I’m contributing to the world by helping my husband. Of course math is what I do as a job, but I help my husband.” I thought, then what am I doing (laughs)? Because I was her assistant! I don’t have a husband! So I felt somehow, I felt that I was on the way down if I stayed there. You know it’s like when my father said, “You don’t want to be a nurse; you want to be a doctor.” I thought, no I don’t want to be a statistical programmer. I had been at graduate school at MIT. So I went back.

CHOI: When you went back, you didn’t live on campus?

TUCKERMAN: Right, I never lived on campus. I lived in group housing.

CHOI: Group houses? Are these like co-ops?

TUCKERMAN: Yes. They are the same, but they’re not official. They don’t have any ties to the university. It was just a bunch of people renting a house from a landlord. They choose each other, and they pay.

CHOI: It’s not actually tied to MIT. How many years were you at MIT?

TUCKERMAN: Well, I don’t quite put it that way. I was in Boston for seven and a quarter years. Of those years I spent one and a half years, let’s say three semesters with this time off, and I had my thesis defense at the end of November but I only graduated in February. So you can add a little here, subtract a little bit there.

CHOI: What was your experience in the math department doing your PhD there?

TUCKERMAN: That too was very mixed. I loved being at MIT. I loved everything about MIT. I had always loved it. I had friends, and I had fun. It seemed such a happy existence and so on. I really liked MIT as an institution. I really liked the UROP program, I liked the day that the sun goes straight through the corridor, all the rituals, they just felt good. That being said, the applied math, it wasn’t a department, but it was a sub group of math, it was a pretty miserable place.
CHOI: Why?

TUCKERMAN: The professors looked down on the students. They made that known. Every year there would be exams for the graduate students. We were a very small class. Applied math took up about a third of math, in floor space with the third floor. Pure math had the first and second floors. There were about eight or so grad students per year out of an entering class of 24. So we had our own everything. There were separate professors, separate courses, a separate entrance, separate graduate exams, though in name we were all in a math department. Applied math was a completely separate part. So they had these exams that maybe one person passed or two. You might think then they didn’t have any students. I don’t know if it’s because they had to or because they wanted to, but they ended up conditionally passing almost everyone, maybe except for one person. You always had the feeling that you were not really adequate.

CHOI: Interesting. Psychologically it was kind of set that way.

TUCKERMAN: They ran a program at Woods Hole that none of us could go to. It was a selective program, and they chose other people. Later, now two years ago I finally went there as a faculty member (laughs). The people running it from MIT were still there. They got old, and they still are strong people (laughs)! I didn’t feel, fortunately, that it was my whole life at all, but yes, it was not a good atmosphere. The culture was just of the applied math. We were definitely made to feel inadequate. Later, I went as a postdoc to University of Texas in Austin, in a group in the physics department, and things were so different! That was a whole way of life, it was so -- science is happiness! People were working all the time, they were happy, and they would work and then go out in the evening together, and it was there that I learned that what faculty members were supposed to do was to publish papers. I had never heard of our faculty at MIT applied math publishing papers. They had published a long time ago, but now what was it that they did? I don’t know! The idea that students were supposed to publish papers? The whole idea of journals being the output of a university department was not present.

CHOI: What was the point then of that subset?

TUCKERMAN: To learn I guess, I don’t know? To perpetuate a standard? In retrospect now, I’ve had many, many conversations with
people who emerged from that department. Everybody was amazed that this department existed. There are two people who were young professors. Not at the time that I was there, but who came later. They became very famous people, and both of them were denied tenure. The department didn't want anybody young. They felt nobody was as good as they were. One person later became a professor at Oxford and a Fellow of the Royal Society. The other one, he's the one with the "Small World" model, I don't know if you've heard of Steve Strogatz. Anyways if you look now in the applied math world, both of these men are far more famous than these MIT department guys.

CHOI: But they had this specific culture that they want to perpetuate.

TUCKERMAN: My own advisor was very young—he was only four years older than I. He was hated by them, and he hated them right back (laughs). They looked down on him. He was eventually the president of the APS Division of Fluid Dynamics. The senior professors -- they were old and crabby.

CHOI: What an unhappy environment!

TUCKERMAN: It was indeed, but I felt it was my work life. I lived in a group house with people not from MIT. Everybody had his/her own thing. Most were not doing graduate studies. They were working or something. A lot of people had problems at work. That's the standard thing. The sitcom sort of thing where you complain, "Oh the boss, oh the this, the that!" So it could have been a lot better, but I wouldn't say it was bad, and I was glad to be at MIT. I was glad to be in Boston.

CHOI: So you were glad for the things outside of your work group, but did you enjoy the learning that you did? Or it was just so stressful?

TUCKERMAN: At some point I think I liked the classes, but I had never been a very "project" sort of person. Even now, I have to say. I'm very successful -- I'm much more successful than I would have ever imagined, and I'm thankful for it every day! It is a miracle. So I figure, I've learned, if I'm this successful I must deserve it. The fact that I don't see myself as deserving it must be a pathology of mine.

CHOI: I think so.
TUCKERMAN: But I know that I have certain weak points. I feel I’m very, very smart in certain ways. I don’t think I am very good at thinking of projects. I don’t think I’m very good at. I’m not a question asker. I’m possibly a question answerer, but I’m not good at asking. So with projects here in France I’ve done a lot of teaching, and there are sometimes project-based classes where I’m supposed to take apprentices or project students. I feel other people have so many projects they don’t know what to do. I don’t! I know I don’t! I don’t have an idea of what people should work on. I’m kind of stymied. A lot of people ask me questions on what to do. I like taking classes, I’ve always been good at taking classes and learning stuff, but then when I was supposed to do a thesis it was more of a challenge. I wouldn’t say that was because I was young. I would say it’s the person I am. I went to work, and I floated around from various professors and didn’t quite hook onto their projects.

CHOI: But they should have helped you with that, right?

TUCKERMAN: Maybe. It’s true they weren’t very nice, and maybe they should have helped me, but given the rest of my track record, I figure if something keeps happening to you, it probably says something about you. I have many positive points, but I do think that that’s not my strong point, thinking of things to work on or getting interested in things. I’m not a very good starter; I’m a good finisher. So I don’t know, I’m willing to take all the blame for that. At some point I had been there for a long time. Some places give master’s degrees as consolation prizes. But they didn’t. I might well have left with a master’s if they just gave them, but they didn’t. I wouldn’t have had anything to show for all those years. It was now getting to five years, and I was going to get through it then leave forever (laughs)! Fortunately my then advisor Phil Marcus came as a junior professor, and I somehow got started with him, and it was actually a very small amount of time I worked with him. It was two years only.

CHOI: Were you interested?

TUCKERMAN: Not that interested, no. I would say I wasn’t that interested either. He wasn’t very much like me. He was a real physicist and really an orders-of-magnitude kind of person, and I’m much more structure of equations. But things were okay. Especially around the end it was very okay. Sufficiently okay that I’d had this dream for a long time of coming to France, and I applied for a NATO fellowship, which I didn’t get. Then I applied for another kind called Chateaubriand, which I did get.
So I came to France as a postdoc even though I had promised that if I got out of my PhD I would leave and never do science again! But things were going sufficiently well that I did. There I would say I had the same experience. Not the same because I was surrounded by pretty nice people. But there too I didn’t really know what to do. I didn’t feel very good about work until I got to Texas, when I got to the University of Texas at Austin at Harry Swinney’s group. That was paradise.

CHOI: So you went to France but then you went to Texas. Wow, you did a lot of studying and moving around then.

TUCKERMAN: But no more than other academics. You need to do undergrad, you do grad school, you do a postdoc, you do an assistant professorship. I did two postdocs, the one in France and the one at Texas, but then I became an assistant professor at Texas so that could count as just the assistant professorship. So no, I don’t think I did more moving around than most academic people.

CHOI: In the math departments that you have seen, are there usually an equal amount of women and men?

TUCKERMAN: No. Mostly men.

CHOI: How has that experience been?

TUCKERMAN: Well, I would have said, fine.

CHOI: You didn’t find any discrimination on the basis of your gender?

TUCKERMAN: How would I know? I’ve only been a woman, right?

CHOI: But you did go to an all womens high school.

TUCKERMAN: I went to high school yes, but I was close to the smartest person there. But it’s certainly clear that in Princeton math -- I mean the people who were around me in Princeton math were the people who later helped prove Fermat’s last theorem. Nobody that I went to school got the Field’s medal, but they were very smart. I read about these guys in newspapers. They’re very, very smart people.

CHOI: But you never felt uncomfortable with being one of few women?
TUCKERMAN: No.

CHOI: That's really nice to know. You went to Texas, and then what transpired from there?

TUCKERMAN: Well, from my time in France I hadn't been that happy professionally or personally, but still I felt that it was a great place to live. I loved the things like everything's so beautiful. I loved my image of France as this. From my mother I was steeped in French culture.

CHOI: How was that? Did you travel a lot here growing up? Was her family here in France?

TUCKERMAN: Yes.

CHOI: So you had been traveling here as a child. So it wasn't a foreign place to you.

TUCKERMAN: Well, it still was because I came as a child for travel, and I hadn't had an independent life here. I never had any studies here. I didn't know how it worked. So I would say it was foreign to me. When I came as a postdoc when I was 27, everything was different (laughs). We have all these holidays, and everybody was gone! I couldn't get the fact that people didn't go to university, they went to grandes écoles, classes préparatoires. It would take me a long time to explain it. I explain it periodically to people. Everything was very different. No, I would say I came as a foreigner. I came as a foreigner with this strange ability to speak French (laughs). Despite knowing certain people still I was very profoundly foreign.

CHOI: Was it difficult, the adjusting?

TUCKERMAN: Well it's interesting to be a foreigner. Now what's your family's situation?

CHOI: They are Korean, but I was born in America.

TUCKERMAN: What age were they when they came?

CHOI: They came for a master's degree and PhD, so for them by now they have lived in the States more than they have lived in Korea.

TUCKERMAN: But when you were growing up was there much contact with your relatives back in Korea?
CHOI: Not that much actually. It’s very expensive to fly back and forth.

TUCKERMAN: By phone?

CHOI: Phone a little bit, but I felt very Korean because my grandma raised me, and she couldn’t speak any English.

TUCKERMAN: Like me. Our housekeeper spoke only French.

CHOI: So I was speaking predominantly Korean when I was younger. I definitely understand the thing of feeling like we cook different food at home from other people. I think you probably understand, but it’s a weird thing stepping out of your house as a kid, but it’s your life so you don’t think it’s weird until you get older and you realize feeling at times like a foreigner walking around in America.

TUCKERMAN: And your grandma was home with you. We had a housekeeper who had brought my mother up, so she was like a grandmother to me. She was somebody who had been in the family, so she might as well been a relative.

CHOI: I see.

TUCKERMAN: So we would come home to her. The reason I would think it might be different for you is because you’re younger and more women were working. Maybe some of your friends’ mothers also worked.

CHOI: Yes, my mom was always working so I always assumed that I had to go to college definitely and shoot for a high college and try to go to graduate school if I could. I had that attitude, but my grandma, her family wouldn’t even let her finish elementary school so it was a completely different culture. My mom was different as well because a lot of women in her time would get married instead of going to school further. But she came here. Anyhow, that’s a sidetrack. How long did it take you to feel more adjusted? I’m assuming by now you feel at home.

TUCKERMAN: No, I think I’ll always be foreign. I moved here definitely, I mean definitively, permanently, when I was 37. When you said your parents had been in the US more time than they had been in Korea, yes, but the time that you were young, it counts for more. I say that, but then I had something else though. When I
came to France originally when I was 27 as a postdoc, that was one thing. The time I spent as a young adult—the time from age 20 to 37—it's a big chunk of time. It's when you are doing your adult thing, and it includes my time when I went to Texas and I had my PhD, and I was going to conferences, I was becoming a professional. It includes all I did there, and this time living in group houses was there too. I came to France for the second time when I was 37. At the time I was married, so I only lived a France life as a young person when I was a postdoc, but it wasn't very easy to make friends or not enough to keep me going. I had my whole network of college friends and so on back in America. Here in France I had some cousins but it didn't quite work out as I might have wanted it to.

CHOI: Were you in Texas until you were 37?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, from 29 to 37 we'll say.

CHOI: I was born in Texas.

TUCKERMAN: Oh, that's where your parents were going to school maybe?

CHOI: My father was at Texas A&M. I was born in Bryant, Texas, but it was very brief. I moved when I was three. Then we moved to Massachusetts. My mom did her PhD at Notre Dame, so it was a lot of moving.

TUCKERMAN: Well that's what people do in America.

CHOI: What was your life like in Texas?

TUCKERMAN: Oh, it was great.

CHOI: Did you like it?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, I was very happy.

CHOI: Was it a big change being in the South?

TUCKERMAN: No, Texas is an island! No, I mean Austin is an island. Austin is like Boston except that it's warm all the time.

CHOI: The weather is really nice? It's not sweltering?

TUCKERMAN: It is in the summer, but it's the opposite of what I said before. To have good snow you have eight months of winter. Then you
have three, four months of summer in Boston, which is very nice. There in Austin, I'd say every season is shifted. That is to say, the winter in Texas is like the fall and the spring in Boston. The fall and spring in Austin is like summer in Boston, which is very nice. There are occasional hot days, but mostly you walk around enjoying the weather, going to the Boston Pops, watching people sailing. That's the time, that's four months of the year. Then you have the summer—where it's way too hot! But that's only three months, maybe four months. Let's say it's four.

CHOI: So it's doesn't consume your whole year.

TUCKERMAN: For four months it's really too hot. Possibly it depends on your taste, maybe five months. But the other months are perfect! You walk around with at most a sweater in December. The rest of the time you're just wearing sandals and short sleeves, and you're perfectly happy! It was very nice. That weather was very nice. It was such a great scientific life at this place that I was at. It just seemed as though science was fun! We would work hard and find new things and go to conferences and it just seemed all organic. It felt like paradise. I miss it still in talking about it now. I really wanted to come to France, but I knew I would never find anything as good as that, and I never did.

CHOI: How come you left if you were so happy there?

TUCKERMAN: Because I've had this feeling that I wanted to go to France.

CHOI: One last part about Austin, so if everyone's happy and you guys are going to conferences and it's happy, were the other people whom you were meeting at the conferences, did they have this happy attitude as well? Not like the MIT folks?

TUCKERMAN: Yes! It seemed as though this was real science, and the people at MIT, they must have woken up on the wrong (laughs) side of the bed. This was science where you work really hard for your results and you would present them and everybody would discuss them. It was really great.

CHOI: You had your children there?

TUCKERMAN: No.

CHOI: Did you get married?
TUCKERMAN: By the time you get to 37 you have had time to go through a lot (laughs). I had a boyfriend that I had met in Boston in the group house. My roommate, he was, as it happened, a postdoc in chemistry, theoretical chemistry at MIT. He helped me through my PhD just as I had always had these nice mentor boyfriends. A very good guy, he was. But I didn't really want to be with him though he was a very good guy. Anyway, he got an assistant professorship in Texas. I had hoped to be making a life in France, but I couldn't and I went and joined him in Texas. I was able to get a postdoctoral fellowship. So I lived with him, but then I met somebody else who was a physics person at Austin. Eventually we got together, and I managed to persuade him to come to Europe, but he works in England.

CHOI: Oh, wow. So where are your children then?

TUCKERMAN: They are with me.

CHOI: But your husband works in England.

TUCKERMAN: He goes there every week.

CHOI: He flies every week?

TUCKERMAN: He was flying, and now he takes the train.

CHOI: How long does that take by train?

TUCKERMAN: The train trip is two hours.

CHOI: That's not bad at all.

TUCKERMAN: The flying is an hour. Door to door it's something like five and a half hours if you fly, and about six and half if you take the trains.

CHOI: He stays for a few days during the week?

TUCKERMAN: Yes.

CHOI: One of my other very good friends, for her entire life her mother has been commuting from Cambridge to New York City. She comes home for the weekend. Her father taught at Brandeis, in Boston.
TUCKERMAN: What does her mother do?

CHOI: She's a professor in British History.

TUCKERMAN: At one of the New York schools?

CHOI: At Barnard College.

TUCKERMAN: I think it's a great life.

CHOI: Yes, you do it for what you're passionate about and then you have your family on the weekends. I think it works. That's cool, I'll tell her about you! How long have you been doing this?

TUCKERMAN: 20 years. Well, 19 (laughs).

CHOI: That's just like them as well! Actually they were worried because her father retired.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, I worry about this too. And then what happens when you don't have your work? That's the reason that you're there. Should you move to be together? Are you going to keep commuting? Yes, I worry about this too.

CHOI: It's funny because her mom is the one who commutes, but her father was thinking if that means he should move to New York and move around with his wife. But my friend was saying the funny thing is that her mom likes having some time away from her dad during the week. She doesn't feel bad about it, but it's just she likes it. You work, and then enjoy your family time also.

TUCKERMAN: The story, the way I put it to people is that my husband is just too good. He's a great father, and he's a great scientist. Fortunately he's away so the children have to depend on me some of the time (laughs)! I have to do my own work, so I think that's good for me (laughs).

CHOI: Your three kids, you had them here in France. When you moved with your husband here...

TUCKERMAN: Everything happened all at the same time. He got his job, I got my job, we got married, we sold the house, my house in Texas which I had with my other boyfriend, we started having kids, we bought a place here—all this was within a year.
TUCKERMAN: People would say to us things like, "It's a big adjustment having a child." Having a child was the least of it (laughs)! Think of moving, getting a new job, selling one house, etc. We bought a place that had to be furnished, the plumbing had to be put into the walls, just everything! It was great though. I felt as though I was living happily ever after (laughs).

CHOI: That is awesome!

TUCKERMAN: That's when I thought, well whatever I went through in the past, it must have been good because it led to now. That's how I've felt ever since.

CHOI: That's really nice. You brought your husband to France initially. Does he speak French?

TUCKERMAN: I might have wanted him to learn, but he speaks well enough. In any case, having grown up the way I did, I rebelled and didn't want to speak French starting when I was 10 or 11 years old. I knew that my parents spoke English perfectly, so why were we speaking French? I realized pretty quickly that if my husband never learned much French, my kids' English would always be very good. I thought it was always very unnatural to speak French with my father who wasn't French although he wanted it. Anyway, so we always speak English at home. My husband doesn't speak much French. I think he speaks more, but he's a big perfectionist. I've learned through our marriage how much he knew about music. I didn't even know how much he knew, how good he had been in piano because he doesn't like to do anything unless he does it well. So he never speaks French in front of me. For all I know he speaks French very well, but he won't speak in front of me (laughs).

CHOI: He wants it to be perfect.

TUCKERMAN: I understand. My French is perfectly fluent, and I understand he might feel a little intimidated. So I used to think, I'd like for him to speak better, but then I realized that this would guarantee my children's English. Incidentally, my children's English is not just like my French, which is accent-less and quite good. But theirs is really totally natural. When they are in the US they meet people who think my kids are so American that they ask, "So do you have any French friends?" My children respond, "Well, yes, I go to school in France." They go
on, "You speak French with your friends sometimes to practice?" "No, not to practice, we speak French because that's what we speak." They can barely conceive that my kids speak just like them. They have all the cultural references which I didn't have coming to France. Nowadays you watch TV series through DVDs. You watch YouTube. You can get it completely. When I was growing up in New York, the homeland was way far away, never something you could reach without travel or telephone. You didn't have cultural references. My mother told me she gave me the children's books she had when she was a child, but that was from 30, 40 years before. So I didn't know any current slang. That's why I'll always be a foreigner. I can't talk like somebody my age in French. I've learned my French from my parents.

CHOI: But when you just walk down the street and you interact with everyone?

TUCKERMAN: Oh, nobody knows.

CHOI: It's just in terms of little cultural pieces.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, that's right. 37 years is a long time.

CHOI: That's pretty amazing though, what you've done coming here at 37!

TUCKERMAN: It's different (laughs). It's a culmination. When I think about it, I wanted to live in France, and I wanted to be a scientist, I wanted to have three children. I'm amazed that I got it all. I think it's a miracle.

CHOI: What is it like for you now teaching here? What did you do once you first came at 37?

TUCKERMAN: This is where, this could take half an hour easily just by itself to explain the French system. It's nothing like what you know. It's very strange. (Laughs) I have an all-research position. That's not special. That's a normal thing in France. Somehow long ago the universities got a bad reputation, and all kinds of things were founded in parallel. I'll tell you several things. The CNRS are all research positions, and there are ten thousand such people who are all permanent full-time researchers. It's like the NSF except it pays people. People are holding conferences in the middle of the year and somebody might say, "Oh I can't go, I have to teach." For us, that's an afterthought. Everybody
from America asks me, “Which university do you teach at?” Well, I don’t teach at any university. You’ve been on this campus, it’s very attractive, is it not? This program here, this school program lasts two years. Each class has 70 people. This whole campus exists for 140 students.

CHOI: Wow, it’s huge, this campus!

TUCKERMAN: It’s all researchers.

CHOI: Okay, I see.

TUCKERMAN: That’s one thing—the CNRS track, which is a non-teaching research track because that’s from one end, from the professional end. From the student end, I now have children in this so I know more about it though I knew about it before. A good student in the sciences does not go to university. No. They stay in high school. They attend something called “Classes Préparatoires” that lasts two years, at the end of which they are entitled, not to get any diploma but to take entrance exams for what’s called the “Grandes Écoles,” which I don’t know how you translate. The educational institutions or something. Some of them you’ve probably heard of since you’re now frequenting France. “École Polytechnique” you may have heard of. “University” has a bad name. “École” means school. Elementary school is an école, but to go to university, that means you fell off the track. Is that not strange?

CHOI: That is strange.

TUCKERMAN: Very strange, yes. So École Polytechnique is the most famous. Science Po, for example, is not a university.

CHOI: It’s not? Okay.

TUCKERMAN: God forbid!

CHOI: I’m going to tell my friend who attends Science Po that I know that because prior to this conversation I had no idea.

TUCKERMAN: Another very well known one is École Normale Supérieure. So the standard high-prestige French thing to do is to spend two years in high school and then take the entrance exams and go to the best Grande École that you can go to. Now that’s only ten percent or maybe five percent of the students. But anybody elite is going to do that. Not quite. There are two exceptions.
Law and medicine are the provinces of the university. That's an honorable choice to make, to go to university for medicine or law. But anything else, if you want to become a physicist or a mathematician, to do social science research or even to go to business school, the thing that you do is that you go for école. Now I said "stay in high school" but it's not really like the rest of high school. There are some special high schools that only have people ages 18 to 20, that have only Classes Préparatoires. It's called "lycée", which means "high school," and the people are called "high school students," and they have a card that says so, but it's somewhere in between.

CHOI: Let's say if you came from France and you're trying to do PhD or a postdoc in the States, you would have an École usually in your CV?

TUCKERMAN: It's complicated. You spend two years in Classes Préparatoires, and then you spend something like three or four years at your Grande École. In the past that was it. Maybe you'd get a PhD, but PhDs are not quite as prestigious or have not been as historically prestigious here. They say people from industry don't want to hire people with PhDs. They thought they were kind of cerebral people who didn't have any practical knowledge. They're trying to change that. You finish your Grande École with something resembling a master's. It's six years after the age of 18. In America to get a PhD generally you enter without a master's. For the first couple of years you take classes and find an advisor. Whereas here—I know this because I'm advising people—a guy sat here just a day before yesterday and said to me he wanted to get a PhD in America. He wanted to apply now in May for September! No. The schedule here is much later. He didn't know what professor to apply to or to say what project because here a PhD is only research. The cutoff points are quite different. You spend two years in Classes préparatoires then you spend three or four years in your Grande École, then you spend three years on your thesis project, whereas in America you would spend four years undergraduate and then four years or five years or whatever in grad school. Here, the Grande École is like the end of undergrad and the beginning of grad.

CHOI: I see.

TUCKERMAN: It's a fine system, but it will make it difficult for someone from France to go do PhD work in the US. I've heard people say, "I've been taking classes for six years, and they want me to take
more classes? Isn’t it time for me to do my thesis work which is what they do here in France?” So my daughter, my eldest one, she is right now, this week, taking the exams for one of the Grandes Écoles. It’ll last a week. Sometimes you take four exams for four different kinds of Grandes Écoles.

CHOI: They are frightening tests?

TUCKERMAN: Four hours in the morning, four hours in the afternoon, for four days. Yes, they are frightening.

CHOI: She’s probably very smart.

TUCKERMAN: She is very smart. In America you have Harvard, MIT, Yale, Princeton. You probably would say, “Oh, Harvard’s more prestigious than Yale.” You have some gradation but basically you have a whole bunch of top ten schools. Let’s say you might have different tastes, like for liberal arts. You may think instead of Oberlin, Swarthmore, etc. Then maybe University of Michigan—that’s a very good school—or Maryland or UT at Austin. Then you go down, and you get a whole list. In France, the École she’s trying to get into, there are 21 spaces. That’s it. Look what I said about this place. There’s the very top. The École Polytechnique has an entering class each year of 400. That’s France-wide, but maybe a fifth nowadays are foreigners. So let’s say it’s something like 300. So on an American scale that would be 1500 for the population. So I guess that’s a pretty decent entering class. That’s like MIT.

CHOI: Can you apply to different Écoles at the same time?

TUCKERMAN: Yes, you do. It didn’t used to be like that, but now each of them is in what they call, a bank of tests. It’s very highly developed. You take one test, and it counts for a bunch of schools. So my daughter’s friends are taking their test in a different curriculum. They’re taking four different banks (laughs), which lead to a total of maybe 30, 40 schools. That’s different. You go to those, and those names are magic, and the rest, everybody knows that if you went to them, then it’s because you didn’t get into the top ones. There’s not this whole variety when it comes to attending schools of, “Well I kind of wanted to study something else.” There’s really only one way. Between École Normale Superieure and École Polytechnique—we’re talking about the sciences now because that’s what I know—you might debate which one is top. Some years maybe some people who
would be accepted to both would go to this, other years they'd go to that. Everything else is definitely lower.

CHOI: Is it really stressful just emotionally then?

TUCKERMAN: I think it's a terrible system. I like everything about France except this higher education system. Then I thought, America is so far away, and it costs so much. Then we realized the perfect solution which was to go to England, which has a system similar to American system and would be close by, and my husband would be near. Somehow it didn't work out for my eldest. So my eldest found herself there in Classe Préparatoires, and now she's at the end of the two years and actually she enjoyed it a lot. She's very, very ambitious and a hard worker. One of my few regrets about not being in America is that if I had some chance been in New York, I would have liked to send my kids not to Hunter but to Bronx Science, where they would be challenged and they would be with a lot of ambitious young kids. Well, turns out my eldest went to a school here that is just like that. As soon as she entered she was so happy. People might say "Oh those kids work all the time they have no social life." No, they have a big social life! You should hear the kids saying, "What did you get on problem seven? Oh, I know someone who sent us a new practice test!" It's like the MIT life. So she worked very hard and was very happy. This is the natural continuation of it.

CHOI: She's into science and math.

TUCKERMAN: Well, she's like me; an oldest, parent-pleasing kid. It's two of us in the same job, my husband and I. You have to be a bit of a rebel not to be like us.

CHOI: How about your younger sister, I'm just curious, is she in the States?

TUCKERMAN: She's in the States. She was a lawyer for a while, a corporate lawyer. Now she's a law professor.

CHOI: Oh my goodness. So you both definitely went for higher education. Though she went more for the humanities while you went into the math and science. So you were in France here and then you came back, and you have been here since you were 37, teaching here, I mean, you are researching here.
TUCKERMAN: (Laughs) Well, students have to get taught somehow. I taught at École Polytechnique for 12 years. All the teachers at Polytechnique are that way. They are all people who have other positions someplace, and they come in to give their classes and then leave. Everybody views that teaching and research are different professions, even though they are occupied by the same people. You have your research job and maybe your teaching job—most people have those at the same place, but many do not. Many will actually be associated with the university on a university campus. When you came to see me, I just came from teaching, but I don’t teach these students here. I teach some other students (laughs). I actually teach here because after five, six years of teaching the students at another place, I asked, “Can I actually give my class in this building?” “Why yes you can.” How convenient!

CHOI: Do you like teaching then? Do you enjoy it?

TUCKERMAN: I didn’t like teaching at École Polytechnique. I was teaching in mechanical engineering, and I am really a mathematician at heart. I’m not a mathematician for a mathematician, but for an engineer I am much more of a mathematician. For a mathematician I would be very applied, but for a physicist I am very mathematical. The people really wanted to take classes in aerospace or civil engineering, but there wasn’t enough room in those classes. So those who didn’t get in (laughs) were in my class. They weren’t so happy. What’s more, I was teaching a project-oriented class, and so there’s the problem I had mentioned. Mostly I farmed them out to other people, but still I always felt inadequate. Whereas now I have a teaching job where I just teach a class on dynamical systems, which is my thing, and I teach it exactly at the level I want to teach it at. I don’t teach with projects, and I’m very happy with that. (Laughs) It’s in a master’s program. When you think about a master’s program—for example, you go to MIT, you’re a student at MIT, you’re taught by professors who are professors at MIT, you’re in the MIT building, they have their office there, and you don’t think about it because that’s considered normal. Here everything is a web. Who are these people that I teach? I know who they are, but some of them are from École Normale Supérieure, and some of them are university students. At their third year, they have been enrolled here even though they are students from École Normale Supérieure. The third year consists of enrolling in a master’s program. The master’s is a joint program between all the Paris universities, and in addition, that’s one master’s program. My courses are cross-
listed with other master's programs which are also joint with
all the other universities. So the students are all doing projects
with people all over the Paris area. Basically France is one big
university. It seems kind of nice, but there's a lot of friction
about it. There are people who say their universities are rated
poorly. Well that's natural, you discourage the students
considered smart from going to university, and you offer
researchers these all-research positions in the CNRS. I don't
have university affiliation. So none of my papers get counted
that way. That's the case with a lot of people. If you look at a
paper published in France, you look at how people sign their
papers. Each one will have three or four different affiliations
even though they have only one job. This place here that I work
in is a lab. That is the unit of research in France. It's called, the
"lab." Even if you're doing social sciences or humanities it's still
called the "lab." I translate it more as "institute." It's too bad
that the word and institution called "University" exists in
France, since it has this bad connotation. Otherwise, they
could call Science Po a "university." Why not, if it were some
other word that didn't have the linguistic feel? I was saying this
is how you right away improve the standard of all the French
universities. You could have "University of École
Polytechnique," "University of Science Po." When you call them
universities, poof, you've got great universities (laughs)! But
they won't. They just won't. To them university is...

CHOI: Bad?

TUCKERMAN: Not all. People always say that. You meet people who are
researchers, and they say, "I've really had a hard time and I'm
really an exceptional case because I didn't go to a Grande École,
I went to university." They will say that. Then you go around a
room with people who are confessing this, and you learn that
actually half of them or more did. They just think that they're
the only ones. There's this feeling that it's Grande École,
Grande École all the way.

CHOI: But it still works.

TUCKERMAN: It works very well somehow. But there's a lot of meetings
about what's going to be our contractual relationship between
this university and this one, for example, can you get thesis
fellowships from this. But as you said, it works. People seem to
think there is a lot of ideology about it. For example, when
you're around 27 or 30, you're a science researcher and you're
trying to get a job. You will apply for two possible kinds of jobs.
One is called, “CNRS researcher” the other one is called, “Maître de Conférences,” which is likened to a professorship, but it's different. It's a whole lot less important since your teaching is kind of supervised, but it's a whole lot more important in that it's tenured. So you're tenured junior faculty. However, the people who are maître de conférences have to teach 192 hours a year, which doesn't sound like very much for people who are not in academics. They say, “Oh, that's 192 hours,” but you know that people at prestigious universities don't teach anything like that much. Though actually, it depends on the field -- people in math teach about that much, people in physics don't. In research I was used to your advancing your career through research, but here there are these two kinds of researchers, those who have to teach and those who don't. “Well some people don't like to teach,” they'll say. “Oh yes, I see, all the people who are in teaching jobs are teaching because they like to teach while CNRS researchers don't like to?” They would respond, “Oh no it's not as simple as that.” “Isn't it that the best people are in CNRS, so shouldn't everybody teach a little?” And they'll say, “Well teaching is not for everybody.”

**CHOI:** Does that attitude get in the way of getting stuff done?

**TUCKERMAN:** Well, I don't know. It bothers me. I feel it's very hypocritical. My daughter who has been now at the super elite French system, she's heard one of her teachers say when she really wanted to really insult the students “You guys are so bad that you deserve to be at the university.”

**CHOI:** Really?

**TUCKERMAN:** Yes!

**CHOI:** That's so mean.

**TUCKERMAN:** Isn't that something? It's mean that they insult them, but it's also mean that that's the insult they give them—that they should be at the university!

**CHOI:** That's bizarre.

**TUCKERMAN:** Isn't it? That's where I said it's completely different. It's just words. What they mean is to say something equivalent to, “No, you should be in a community college or you should be at something not competitive.”
CHOI: The word, “university” holds that much weight, it’s interesting. Do you know when that started to happen?

TUCKERMAN: Well, I think maybe around the time of Napoleon or something like that. It’s quite old. The system of Grande École and Classes Préparatoires. These schools were all founded around 1800.

CHOI: So it’s pretty set.

TUCKERMAN: The CNRS, though, was founded only after the war, just after the war in 1945, 1944, something like that. When you’re in Classes Préparatoires, it’s not at all like university. First of all you live at home. You live at home if you’re lucky because you have the comfort of your family. If you’re unlucky then you don’t live at home, and you live in a rented room.

CHOI: There are no dorms?

TUCKERMAN: No.

CHOI: There’s no student community based around living, staying up together doing work?

TUCKERMAN: No! That’s why I didn’t want my kids to go to school here. But they seem to have formed a pretty good group. None of them do this so it’s not like you’re deprived. Again the thing about my daughter, she and her peers, they get together a lot to do stuff. She’s always said jokingly, because I bring this up a lot, “Yes, I know I should have been in the dorms with all those roommates instead of with my stupid family, yeah, yeah, yeah!” It’s what her parents want for her instead of it being a rebellious or independent gesture to be in the dorm. “Yes I know it’s so much better in the dorms, right?” she says sarcastically. I say, “Well, you don’t want to live with old parents like us!” She thinks it’s funny! None of her friends think they should be in dorms either, they are the “lucky ones” because those who don’t live with their parents live in these little isolated rented rooms. They do seem to maintain good relationships with their parents, though I feel it would have been the end of the world for me to live with my parents at that age, I wonder what she would have felt if she had been in a dorm. I wonder if it’s really as okay as she says? I worry about this all the time. Is it okay that she lives like this? I don’t know!

CHOI: I guess it’s fine because she seems to be happy.
TUCKERMAN: She seems happy.

CHOI: And everyone else does it too.

TUCKERMAN: But had she done something else, would she be saying, "I can't believe I almost didn't go to the dorms. I can't believe I almost stayed living with my family. You were right it's so different to be with my peers!" Would she be saying that? I don't know!

CHOI: What about your other kids?

TUCKERMAN: The other one, she is graduating now and she's going to take the baccalaureat exam. She has been accepted to a university in England, but not quite because there in England—this I didn’t know until two years ago—they base their admissions on "A-levels." Have you heard of A-levels? That’s their big exams. Did you read Harry Potter?

CHOI: I read some of them.

TUCKERMAN: You’re not a Harry Potter fan! Because they’re so clearly modeled after the English system. The Owls are like the A-levels. So they admit students based on the A-levels. But the A-levels are taken in June, and they have the results in August. How do they do this? What they do in England is they give what are called "Conditional Offers." You’re accepted if you get a certain score. If it were an American applicant, it would be your AP tests. They would say, "I see you’re taking this and that AP class. If you get 4 or above in this and 5 in that subject, then you can be admitted." In France, the English universities use the bac exam. In fact, admissions in France are not based on the bac exam. The people are admitted in June before they've passed their bac. So it's like in America where you’ve gotten your acceptance in college and the only reason you keep working is because you’re a good kid and you’ve always worked and you’re not going to stop now, but really you could. All you have to do is pass your high school classes. So too it is here in France, except for the few people who might be going to university in England. They are the ones for whom it really matters what you get in your bac. So my daughter is working very hard for her bac because she’s been accepted if she gets a 14 out of 20. She’s just on the edge. We’ve done many simulations of what she might get based on this grade and this and if she has a good day and then, etc. Some days some
simulations come out 14.1, some come back 13.9, so she's working very hard.

CHOI: Is she very nervous now then?

TUCKERMAN: Well, she has a boyfriend. Sometimes that seems like a good reason to go away. Sometimes it seems like a good reason to stay. After all, she's not going to stay with her high school boyfriend. But he is very nice (laughs).

CHOI: He's comfort.

TUCKERMAN: Her friends are staying. Nobody else is going away. My oldest one, she had two friends who went to England. That's what I hadn't realized when I thought my children should go to England and live this dorm life. What I hadn't been thinking of was that in England or America, everybody leaves. Whatever friends you had in high school, everybody leaves! They're all gone too. Maybe you see them at Christmas when they come back. One of my daughter's friends in England is very happy, but the other one kept missing her friends back in Paris, who were still getting together in the same way that they were. She's all alone there in England and her old friends are still together with their group of friends! So the friend groups from high school don't break up. If you've been happy in high school then it's sad to leave. For my second daughter's case I'm afraid because she does have a good group of friends. It's not just the boyfriend. There are other friends. Is she going to feel left out? I worry about that.

CHOI: Is she set on going?

TUCKERMAN: Not necessarily. She has a second choice which is a university in France. We visited some universities, and we told her it's not bad. Classes préparatoires: I didn't tell you about it, I just told you about its existence. You take classes 35 hours a week.

CHOI: Wow.

TUCKERMAN: Basically 8:30am to 6pm every day.

CHOI: It's a full-time job!

TUCKERMAN: You have a four-hour written exam every Saturday morning from 8:30am to 12:30pm.
CHOI: How long does this go on for?

TUCKERMAN: Two years. Also you take two hour-long oral exams every week.

CHOI: That seems like a boot camp.

TUCKERMAN: It is exactly. That's the right word. So you can see it's not for everybody. It's not as sad as it seems because again they are all in that together, but I don't think it's for my second daughter. She's not that way. My first one is very driven, and every week she would be working towards that test.

CHOI: But I agree for some people it works to be in that driven environment, while other people it's not the way they learn.

TUCKERMAN: That's the prestigious French system. That's what it demands, two years like that.

CHOI: Then they make other people feel a certain type of way?

TUCKERMAN: None of this finding yourself, no. I don't know if you can "find" yourself while you're in Grande École. Hopefully my daughter will pass her exams and get into Grande École, and I'll know what that's like, but I don't know at present. I've seen though. I taught a class at a Grande École in which the students seemed very relaxed. I've heard that they completely let go after two years of preparing like that; they figure they are entitled.

CHOI: Schooling systems are different. My parents went to the most prestigious university of their time in Korea, so you studied really, really crazy hard in high school, to the point where you don't have a life. When you're outside of school you go to a different prep school. On the weekends you study. You take a big exam, you get in, and then you don't study in college.

TUCKERMAN: That seems to be like France, displaced to that age, 18 to 20. That's when you do it. I've felt sometimes that I've failed her, that I wanted her to go to university with a residential life, and she ended up in Classes Préparatoires. They have these big parties just before—they have a lot of vacations here. They have these big parties before every vacation. By now they are 18, they're on their own, and they might rent a whole boat on the Seine, for example. She was head of the social committee. She collected ten euros from everybody and had a thousand in cash. I said, "Don't you want me to come and pay for the boat
with a check?” And then they have an all-night party there. They go on these field trips with their teachers to study geology or something. They go skiing on their trips, part of the time.

CHOI: It sounds nice!

TUCKERMAN: That’s not very often. Most of the time of course it’s study, study, study, but still they have these parties. They have this Christmas thing where they were all assigned little brothers and sisters, and got gifts form them. They also have a class sweatshirt that they all wore to the entrance exam to intimidate the students from other schools (laughs). So it’s not totally terrible. It’s like being in the army but a lot of people like being in the army. They feel community. They feel that their life has a purpose.

CHOI: Later on in life, that’s the bond they share with them.

TUCKERMAN: I told myself that. That it’s not the end of the world that she didn’t go to England to the dorms, that she stayed living with us. She says, “I like living with you guys!” I think, I didn’t like living with my parents! But I think, well, we rent movies, and try to make it nice at home, maybe it’s okay! Maybe she’s right! Maybe it is okay!

CHOI: It’s nice for you because you get to keep her around more.

TUCKERMAN: It is nice for me.

CHOI: I think that’s very kind of you to think that way. It really is because a lot of parents wouldn’t even care to think about that.

TUCKERMAN: As many people will say, I didn’t notice the time go by. When I first had the kids and they were very little, when I thought of the idea of their leaving, that was someone else that they were going to leave. That was people my parents’ age. That was old people. That wasn’t me that they would be leaving. I didn’t think I would be the same person, and all through the years I could hardly believe I was the parents’ generation. I always think, oh you shouldn’t be at home. My son doesn’t have many friends. He seems perfectly happy. He plays a lot of computer games. He gets along fine, but he doesn’t have a lot of friends. I say, “What are you doing at home with your parents? You should be off, inviting friends.” He says, “Mom, I don’t want to invite friends!” I say, “Well, okay alright.”
CHOI: You keep forgetting because you keep thinking in terms of you.

TUCKERMAN: When I was a kid I wasn’t very happy. I was lonely at home there in Queens. I felt misunderstood. I feel I became myself through interactions with my peers. My kids are living a different life. Everybody says this about the younger generation. They listen to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. They listen to the same music that my generation did when we were teenagers. They dress the same. You dress the same. Their hairstyles are the same. Apparently they relate to us, kind of like members of their own generation. Not that my parents were bad in any way, but I would never have felt that they were my friends. But somehow my kids seem to feel that way. Again, I’m a little bit afraid, and I don’t want to boast—well I don’t know what they’ll say later. Maybe it’s not true at all. But so far, it feels okay.

CHOI: Like you said when I had asked you what it felt like being the only woman in your department, that’s just your life. How can you relate to anything else? Your daughters are having the same experience. Maybe someone else might say, “I want to keep my kids at home no matter what.” My parents wanted to keep me at home and not send me to a dorm. We had the rule at MIT that you had to live at least freshman year in the dorm. I was so happy because I had that option. But for you, you’re giving them that option! I think that’s the best thing to feel like no one is pressuring you in one way. So I think that’s actually great.

TUCKERMAN: I hope (laughs).

CHOI: No, I have to say it’s fantastic! Now that I’m older I relate more to my mom than I used to, and it makes everything so much better. I just think if you’re open and you’re thinking about different perspectives it’s a positive effort. That’s so nice because my mom didn’t think about my feelings on social things when I was younger. I think that’s actually wonderful of you.

TUCKERMAN: My kids laugh at me (laughs) for how much I care. My daughter says, “I don’t want to go to this party, I have to study.” I say, “But your friends are there!” “Mom, I just saw my friends! I don’t have to see them again now! Really it’s late, and I don’t want to go to this party! You’re not going to make me go to this party.” “Of course I can’t make you go to the party, shouldn’t
you want to go?” “No, I already have my pajamas on already and I'm all comfortable now, why should I go to this party?” “Okay! Alright!”

CHOI: That’s so different and amazing! It’s the best thing I’ve heard of.

TUCKERMAN: It feels great. I just feel guilty.

CHOI: No you shouldn’t!

TUCKERMAN: I don’t feel guilty all the time, but I’m fighting it. Alright, I do feel guilty all the time (laughs).

CHOI: Even if you feel guilty you should know that you think about both sides, and I think that’s the most important thing that you really consider both sides. Then that’s fair!

TUCKERMAN: I hope!

CHOI: So your son is the youngest?

TUCKERMAN: He’s 14, that’s right. I’ll have him around for a long time.

CHOI: If your oldest daughter makes it to the Grande École, and the other one goes to England, then it will shed some light on the two possible education experiences.

TUCKERMAN: Apparently in École Normale Superieure, they do live in dorms. They think of residences as really just a place to live. For example, there’s a housing office at one of the universities that my second daughter will go to if she doesn’t go to England. You look on the web, and what is it? It’s the name of someone to call if you’re having problems with your landlord. That’s the housing office. There is no housing. There’s someone to call about legal trouble. They don’t have any housing! You go to a real estate agent. Private companies have stepped up. No, that’s not true. There’s also government dorms, but they apply to all the universities all through Paris. You apply in general. It’s nation-wide. It’s a French Government institute called the “CROUS.” Basically you get assigned a room or not based on your family income. If your family income is low etc., and/or the distance you are from your school is far. People can get rooms there, but we live very close. It’s a 20 min bus ride, so there is no way she would ever get it. They want to hear two, three, four hours away. So residence is not viewed as a lifestyle. It’s viewed as a place to sleep. You need a room, they
might provide you with one, maybe, or they might provide you with an address list of some. The idea that you're part of your community doesn't exist. But that idea does seem to exist at École Normale Superieure. They seem to have residences where the kids live together. So I'm hoping that that will be the case.

CHOI: You never know, she might miss the time living with you!

TUCKERMAN: I'm going to make her go (laughs)! Once I had thought maybe she could live with a bunch of her friends even when she was in high school. But the friends and their parents looked at me as though I was crazy. They said, "What? You're going to send your kid off when they're in Classe Préparatoires? What about all the support that their family can give them? And you're going to make them go off and live on their own and do their own cooking and this and that? Don't you know that Classes préparatoires is a time when your daughter really needs her family?" Okay (laughs)! I didn't feel that way at all. The MIT education is a strenuous experience, and you don't think that your parents will help you get through it. You don't think you need them. What relevance do they have? But that's the way they talk here!

CHOI: And I never knew that. It's a completely different spin on how you go further and go to school and make your friends. But they have their friends from high school.

TUCKERMAN: They do have their friends from high school.

CHOI: Do you see yourself living here for the rest of your life?

TUCKERMAN: Yes.

CHOI: This is your favorite place?

TUCKERMAN: Yes.

CHOI: Then that's so good!

TUCKERMAN: It is. I'm very lucky. I worry a little about this retirement thing as we were saying. Once my husband and I retire, are we really going to live in separate countries and commute? Maybe he's going to want me to come live in England. Sometimes I think we don't have friends because we moved to these foreign countries or because French people are unfriendly or because
this or that. But then we talk to some other people, people our age who stayed in America, and they say, "You know we don’t have many friends either." Maybe it’s just because when you have kids your life is kind of complete. As my daughter said, "Why would I go out when I’m here? Don’t make me go out!"

CHOI: Oh my gosh my parents would have died to have me say things like that! I was the opposite. I think that’s pretty cool.

TUCKERMAN: My parents didn’t get the opportunity—I wasn’t invited to any parties (laughs)!

CHOI: That’s fascinating. I think it’s awesome for you because you really see a different type of lifestyle. That wasn’t what you grew up with. She really thinks you’re strange with your ideas to socialize more!

TUCKERMAN: Yes (laughs). She says it with that air that a teenager would have about studying. "Yeah, yeah socialize more." I guess whatever your parents try to have you do looks like the old culture to you. If it includes parties and social life, well then that’s just part of their old culture (laughs).

CHOI: I would love my children to be like that. Oh you don’t want to go to the party? Sure you can stay home with me!

TUCKERMAN: And we do. We have a good life. We often watch movies together—the way you can nowadays with the DVD player. Now you get the movie, you all fight about what movie you want to watch, and you watch it together. We have snacks. It feels good. I feel it feels good to them too, I suppose. I know it does. I think I’m so lucky. I’m just so lucky.

CHOI: Do you think the French style or European style of living is happier or healthier culturally than American living?

TUCKERMAN: Well, let’s see, certains thing, definitely yes. Higher education is free. So a lot of pressure is off. In fact if my daughter gets into Grande École, the most prestigious one, she’ll be paid a salary each month, minimum wage or more. That’s unusual, though. That’s only for the highest ones. They’re talking about phasing that out.

CHOI: But still it’s free!
TUCKERMAN: But it's free, exactly. French people are such complainers. They'll say, "Free, yes! But you still have to live!" Well, yes, you still have to live, what do you expect?

CHOI: You don't have 200,000 dollars in debt.

TUCKERMAN: Health care and the vacations. People have these long vacations so I suppose that helps families bond together. Everybody has those kinds of vacations. Everybody goes skiing. Even lower middle class people. It's considered a national right. If a kid can't go skiing, they can go with some kind of city-run day camp because all kids are entitled—every French person is entitled to go skiing. Like the Fresh Air Fund in the U.S. -- every kid is entitled to go to the beach or to the country sometimes.

CHOI: That's amazing.

TUCKERMAN: Isn't it amazing? There are a lot of vacations, but not as many as people think because it goes on until the first week of July. Whenever school is out and it's not a public holiday, as tomorrow and the next day are, the school turns into a day camp. You actually could always have your children taken care of, not quite for free, but almost and sliding-scale, by the school. Day camps substitute for school every working day from 8:30am to 6:30pm. So that's amazing.

CHOI: Yes it is.

TUCKERMAN: From age three on. It's a little harder to get day care for the younger ones. From age two and a half on, the state will take care of your children. But the people I know who are affluent enough say, "Oh no, the children are so tired! I couldn't send them to the day camp!" I say "Aren't they having fun there?" "Oh no, children should be at home on their days off!" At home, watching TV? Well maybe they are imaginative and doing cut-outs and this and that, but I thought that kids are better off with other kids because when I was a kid I was happier with other kids. I always felt that while I was home, all the other kids were off with each other, and I was the only one who was at home. So I always sent my kids to the day camps that the schools became.

CHOI: So you always have someone watching your kids. I also noticed there's so many beautiful cafés, so many beautiful places to walk. A lot of people walk.
TUCKERMAN: Boston is very beautiful too. I often miss Boston. When I see it in movies, it really is beautiful.

CHOI: I think it's lovely. It's great for walking, but there's something here about the little buildings that are quaint, and the architecture isn't all built the same.

TUCKERMAN: But there's that in Cambridge as well. If you walk down Mass Ave, admittedly from MIT to Central Square is not that appealing. But from Central Square to Harvard, and you go up and you go up to Porter Square—the subway didn't used to go there in my time, but I know it does now, near Davis Square, you go up. When you turn right at Central Square what street is that?

CHOI: Prospect?

TUCKERMAN: No, before, at Central Square, turning right going up towards Somerville. What's that street?

CHOI: Is it around the McDonalds? Or right at the end of MIT?

TUCKERMAN: No, further. Let me see online.

CHOI: My thing is that I could also be prejudiced because I've been there for so long.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, you grew up there. For me it was very special compared to New York. I felt Boston was so much more beautiful. For example, the people walked along the river whereas in New York it's all highway along the river. I thought, oh how wonderful, a city that is claimed for the people.

CHOI: It could be prejudice because I'm also in love with New York City.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, everybody is. I understand.

CHOI: I feel like the café culture here is strong here. Everyone is eating out, and the supermarkets and the shopping stores are closed on Sundays so the only things open are the restaurants it seems. It's a different culture from America clearly, but there are things to like and not to like. Generally, however, you like French culture more?
TUCKERMAN: Generally yes, that's why I'm here. Okay, let's look at Cambridge, MA on the map to see what street I'm talking about (looking on Google maps). Maybe it is Prospect. Where is Central Square? You're right, it is Prospect Street. I lived at Pleasant Street. Right around there, the corner of Pleasant and River pretty much. That's where I lived. I lived in my group house.

CHOI: So is that Somerville?

TUCKERMAN: No Somerville is here.

CHOI: It's Cambridge, you lived in.

TUCKERMAN: It's Cambridgeport.

CHOI: I thought you lived in Somerville.

TUCKERMAN: No, the year before, I lived in Somerville. Cambridgeport is this whole region here, but I'm sure you know that. Hardly anybody seemed to live there at my time. I don't know how it is at this time.

CHOI: I've been around the area a lot actually.

TUCKERMAN: My part of Somerville was very hard to get to. The transportation was really bad. That was my second year. My first year I lived in Marlborough Street and Mass Ave.

CHOI: It's kind of near Newbury Street, so you crossed the bridge.

TUCKERMAN: Yes Beacon Hill, Back Bay. It was very nice.

CHOI: Do you go back for the reunions?

TUCKERMAN: No. I don't feel very connected. I was just a graduate student there. Graduate students might be connected to their departments, but remember I didn't feel that good about my department. I felt good about MIT but without any real particular thing to attach that to. So I had this abstract good feeling about MIT, but (laughs) I don't think I would go.

CHOI: Do you ever go to visit Boston?

TUCKERMAN: Not very much. I was there. Remember two years ago I was invited to Woods Hole finally all those years later? So I visited
Boston on the way there. Then I was there for a longer period for about two three days. It doesn’t sound very long, but it was so intense. I saw people that I hadn’t seen in a long time. It was very, very strange. That was about six years ago? Five years ago? Which at my age feels pretty recent. It was wonderful.

**CHOI:** Do you go back to New York City ever?

**TUCKERMAN:** No, not much either. After my father died my mother moved down the block from me. I don’t really have anybody to go back to.

**CHOI:** Do you have any advice for people trying to figure out their careers or anything else you would like to add?

**TUCKERMAN:** Everything I said is very personal, but before I met you I thought, what would I have said? When I was planning to go to France when I was in graduate school, people thought I was crazy. They thought I was doing career suicide or something. They said, “In France, you go to Europe for vacation, you don’t go to Europe to work!” But in fact I feel I have a very good scientific life. In my field of soft matter or fluid dynamics or dynamical systems, there’s more here in France than elsewhere. I feel I’ve met many other former Americans or current Americans in better circumstances because you bond more with fellow expatriates. I felt that from the time I came as a postdoc, except for losing this perfect group that I had in Texas. I would say I have a good scientific life in Europe. People should not be discouraged from that. I’ve always thought that it was very hard for me to fight to come Europe. People thought it was crazy. They were always saying, “Why are you going there?” Whether for science or non-science they say, “Why are you going there?” Yet, I never understood this. In America people would go to California saying, “I wanted a change.” They didn’t need any more reason than that. You say you want to go to Europe, and you hear, “Why? What?” No reason is good enough for them. They can’t relate to at all. That, I always found so strange. I understand it’s difficult to immigrate for papers, and not everybody can do it because of citizenship difficulties and so on, but people didn’t even consider it. They thought it was nuts.

**CHOI:** In terms of practicality and the science culture, why would people look down on it? What do you say in response then? What’s the French culture of research? Or the European culture of research that has been so great?
TUCKERMAN: Well, let's just say French for the moment. I remember when I came for my postdoc, my postdoc advisor who was a very famous man, met me at the train station, and he brought me to the Institute. That, you can imagine anybody doing in a friendly way. Then we get to the Institute, and we go to his office and he says, "This is my desk, and this is yours." I would be sharing the office with him! I realized in the Institute everyone was two to an office except the department head. Maybe the graduate students were three to an office. There wasn't a huge gap. There isn't this faculty and then the postdocs and then the students. It seemed much more egalitarian. I kind of like that.

CHOI: I would like that too.

TUCKERMAN: People didn't seem to need grants the same way that Americans did. So everything just seemed more low-key. There are these nice places you can go in France also. There are these study centers in the Mediterranean or in the Alps. You can just sign up and have a workshop there to go to, and people just come for almost no cost and then it seems as though there's a lot of nice infrastructure. Conferences here cost much less. They cost, I don't know, three or four hundred. They include lunch where everybody is and lodging. So all these things that I would have said that the university life doesn't offer such as residences and this and that, but they do seem to have it when you're grown-up scientists. You can live this happy scientific life, which I feel I've gotten to do.

CHOI: Which makes a big difference if you're happy in what you're working on.

TUCKERMAN: Well, I wouldn't go quite that far. I feel I've always had trouble thinking of things to do again. But, still, I think I've had as happy a life as a person could have.

CHOI: I'm glad to know that! That's really positive thinking. Thank you so much!

TUCKERMAN: Well, thank you!