



LE

Interviewed by Barry Chad

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Interviewer's Note

Fond childhood memories of ushering at the family-owned movie theater in Ellwood City. The freedom and security of picking wild raspberries in the woods off Perrysville Avenue. Her grandfather, her mother's father, private barber to the members of The Pittsburgh Club. Experiencing the cultural life of the city in the '60s through her association with the Pittsburgh Symphony.

Interview

bc: Your mother was a fan of opera so she named you for a popular opera star of the 1930s.

LE: Yes. Lucrezia Bori [1887-1960].

bc: I'm not familiar with her.

LE: Well, I don't know where [exactly] in Italy she [performed], but she had quite an [international] career and had something wrong with her throat for quite a long time and was not able to sing. She had to stay silent for, something like, a year. But she came back great guns and went on with her career. For back in those times, that was really something.

bc: Have you always lived in Pittsburgh?

LE: No. I'm not from Pittsburgh. I'm originally from Ellwood City, Pennsylvania. I've been in Pittsburgh since 1953 when I graduated from high school. And then I came here to college and I just remained in Pittsburgh. I went to Carlow [College]. Actually it was called Mount Mercy at that time, Mount Mercy College. I graduated from there in 1957. I was a Biology major, Chemistry and English minor, and [I studied] Medical Technology. Then I did my internship at Mercy Hospital, here in Pittsburgh, and was certificated by the American Society of Clinical Pathologists, and went to work as a Medical Technologist. I worked in a Laboratory with blood samples. I worked in bacteriology. It all had to do with testing for various diseases that people had. We were under the direct tutelage of a physician. There was nothing you did that he didn't oversee. In the Department of Pathology. And even in a private practice, which then I went into, at a later point, I was a medical technologist for five physicians who had a private practice. They were hematologists/oncologists. I did their blood counts.

bc: When you graduated from high school in Ellwood City, you knew what you wanted to do?

LE: I thought I did. I thought I wanted to be a medical technologist, but what I really...even though I was very immersed in science, I never really liked it. I always wanted to be an English teacher. [She chuckles.] And I remember my father saying, That won't get you a dime. You know--so far as salary is concerned. So, I went to school to be a medical technologist. And, as I said, I never really enjoyed it. I never really pursued my career with a great deal of zeal. (I didn't do it all of my life.)

I was a Chemistry minor, but I was also an English minor. And there was a professor that I had whom I really really adored. The man was sort of like a free spirit and a freethinker. And you have to understand, had he probably maybe stayed there, I may have been influenced to, at some point, do a Bachelor's [degree] in English. But, because he was such a freethinker, he lasted at the college maybe for about a year, a year-and-a-half, before they got rid of him. To this day I remember his name. His name was Charles Glenn Francis Houston. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. And he was not to be tolerated by the Powers That Be. [In discussing this inspirational Professor and others like him, I remark to LE, "Sometimes you pay for your independence."] I think I have in my lifetime, [she remarks.]

bc: How have you, in your life, balanced your career in Medical Technology?

LE: In 1964 I married; and, when I got married, I was 29. And at that time that was considered rather late to marry. And so...my husband was only employed part of the year, as a musician, with the Pittsburgh Symphony...so we went to Chicago for the summers.

bc: Did you ever meet William Steinberg?

LE: [Yes. He gave the impression of being very austere, but he had a very droll sense of humor. He was a decent decent man.]

Well, we were married, and then I just said, I want to go to Chicago. So I quit working. And then, coming back from Chicago, [the Symphony] went on an eleven-week tour of the United States and the Middle East. I wanted to go on part of that tour. In fact, my father said to me, Go on the whole tour; if you have to go to Beneficial Finance and take a loan, go for the entire eleven weeks. But I didn't do it, and I'm sorry for not having done it now. Because at that time, Tehran was very viable and gorgeous; as was Beirut. [Beirut] was sort of like the pearl of the Middle East at that time. And, foolishly, I didn't go. I decided to go to Western Europe instead for four weeks. Which was wrong.

bc: What instrument did your husband play?

LE: He was a violist. And there's a lot that I remember that he told me about various musicians that nobody even has ever.... You say something about Willie [William] Primrose [noted violist, 1904-1982] to somebody today and they have absolutely no idea who he was. It's even getting to the point now where people don't know who Artur Rubinstein [pianist, 1887-1982] is. If you talk to younger people, they have no idea about whom you are talking.

bc: Where did you and your husband meet?

LE: In the doctors' office where I was employed. [She laughs.] He came in right about the time that Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. He wasn't able to stay because they [the Pittsburgh Symphony] were going to Philadelphia to do a memorial concert for Kennedy. We were married the following year.

Then, after my husband died, I went to work at Rite Aid as a cashier and I stayed there for 20 years. I stopped working—it'll be two years in May.

bc: How did you enjoy working with the public?

LE: Working with the public is (it can be) very trying—especially when they have an idea that you are subservient to them...and that, if you are doing that [kind of retail] work, then you really can't be too bright. [We both laugh.] It always tickled me to interact with many folks, with many people who fancied themselves to be well-educated...but, by their treatment of a person who is working behind a counter it shows how ill-bred actually they are and ill-educated. They can't be "educated" and treat people overtly as subservient to them. [In waiting on customers] you always have to be a lady and show them that you are.

bc: So you were here in Pittsburgh in the '50s. Where did you live through those years?

LE: Well, of course, I lived in the dormitory. And then, when I worked here, oddly enough, I'm one of these individuals who lived with her relatives. I lived with my mother's sister. (My mother was originally from Pittsburgh. And then she married and moved to Ellwood City.) I lived with my mother's sister and her husband and their family when I graduated from Carlow. And when I worked here in Pittsburgh, I lived with them. [That's how you make ends meet.] Contrary to what my father thought, the salary that I was making as a medical technologist would have left me very little had I rented an apartment. Renting an apartment, owning a car—there was no way that I could have rented an apartment and owned a car on the salary I was making.

bc: What was Pittsburgh like when you came here in the '50s from Ellwood City?

LE: I used to love to come to Pittsburgh. I loved it here. There was just a lot to do. My aunt lived nearby to West View Park which is no longer. There were always trips to West View Park. And, because I had a younger sister too, who would come into Pittsburgh and then we would go with our cousins. And going downtown was very exciting. It was very exciting to go downtown. And also, too, when you went to town, you didn't go...like a slob. [You dressed up.] "We're going to town today." So you wore a nice coat if it were cold. And you had gloves—you always had gloves. There were so many department stores down there. And, it was just a very exciting place to be. You wouldn't want to walk up or down Fifth Avenue because you were always jostled. Someone was always in your way. Or they were bumping into you. And then too, there was the Diamond Market downtown. But we also went to the market on the North Side. That's where my aunt and uncle did all their shopping 'cause we lived on Perrysville Avenue. My mother and her family were on Sherman Avenue in the Mexican War Streets.

Bob Batz, from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, in 1994 did an article [Bob Batz, Jr. "Their Story Is a Cut Above." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 16 October 1994] on my mother and her family. It was in the *Post-Gazette*. He is a wonderful wonderful young man. He's a wonderful person. That article...that's my mom's history. My grandfather, my mother's father, he was the private barber to the members of The Pittsburgh Club. And those were the Darlings and the Singers and the Scaifes....

bc: He was the in-house barber at The Pittsburgh Club? This is your grandfather?

LE: My mother's father. Yes. [In-house barber] and he went to their homes too. They would call him and send for him to go out to their homes in Sewickley and my mother and my aunt would go along. 'Cause my mother even remembered...when I was working then as a medical technologist, I told her the name of a woman who came in and she said, "Oh, we would go out there. Zia [my mother's sister] and I would play together with the Holdship sisters." These were all people, I guess, out in Sewickley. Harmar and Mary Denny—the Dennys—were clients, Mr. Denny was a client of my grandfather. My mother and Aunt Stella would go—the chauffeur would take them out with him.

So it's very interesting because I think that truly my family really are true Pittsburghers. My mom's family. They're really truly Pittsburghers.

My grandmother came from Italy, but she came from Turin. She worked in a stock brokerage. She was a working woman when she came to this country. (My mother's mother.) And she came here and married my grandfather. (If you read that article, you'll see.) My grandmother was a working woman, came from the North of Italy. [My grandfather] was from the South of Italy and was a barber; and there was always just constant friction.

bc: Between Northern and Southern?

LE: Between Northern and Southern. It was really wild.

bc: [I put in a plug for PIP (Point in Person) the local chapter of POINT (Pursuing Our Italian Names Together) that meets on the 3rd floor of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh at 10:30 a.m. on the 3rd Saturday of the month.]

LE: [The differences in temperament between Northern Italy and Southern Italy]--it's a whole different way of thinking. My grandmother was rather well-educated. I remember my grandmother very well. I adored her. I still do. She's been dead since 1960. I remember very little of my grandfather because he died early. My grandmother was widowed when she was about 55-years-old.

bc: So she came here with pretty good skills. She had been working at a brokerage. That's rather atypical for an immigrant.

LE: Yes. Yes it is. And my grandmother spoke without the trace of an accent. She absolutely had no accent whatsoever. She was always mistaken primarily for being German. It was kind of funny. And she taught. She taught her husband how to read and how to write. I understand that my grandfather was quite a wonderful human being, but [in many ways] frustrated.

When [Bob Batz] interviewed my mom, my mom said, “It’s kind of strange; history kind of repeats itself”: [my mom] married a man whose roots were Southern Italian and moved to a small town.... My mother considered herself a Northern Italian although her father was from Calabria. My father was a projectionist in a movie theater and the theater was owned by his mother and his uncle in Ellwood City. It was called the Majestic Theater.

bc: Did you ever see the Italian movie about the...?

LE: “Cinema Paradiso.” That’s a beautiful movie.

bc: Yes, it’s a great movie. So this was a family-run movie theater.

LE: Yes. I know that they bought the theater. Grandma and her husband, I think, and another relative whom I always called “Uncle Frank.” They bought the movie theater and proceeded to run it, and that would have been in the ‘40s. And they made a very decent living. In 1949 they decided to take a huge sum of money and remodel the movie theater. (And they paid cash to have this remodeling done.) At that time television began; and the movie business went, sort of, belly-up for a long period of time. My father was the projectionist during the belly-up time. Which was not good.

bc: Is the theater still there?

LE: The theater was sold, and it burned down several years back. There’s nothing there of the theater any longer.

bc: Did the movies play a big role in your childhood?

LE: Well yes, it certainly did because I spent a lot of time in the movie theater. People today even tease me. My neighbor, who is going to be 86-years-old, and I take a walk together every day. And he always is constantly telling me that he has such-and-such something-or-other on DVD.

And I said, “Leonard, you don’t understand: I want to go to the movie theater. I don’t want to get a disk, and take it home and look at this little [screen]....”

And he says, “Well, you can get a 64-inch screen.”

And I say, “I don’t want a 64-inch screen: it’s not as big as the theater screen.

And, in order to really enjoy a movie, you go to a movie theater—and you get out of your house.”

No, I loved the movies; and, for a while, I was an usher. My sister was the candy seller. I did the ushering. I never wanted any part of fooling around with the candy. And then it deteriorated: the business just went totally downhill. And it was very sad. It was very sad.

bc: You must have seen the same movie over and over again.

LE: No, because the thing is...the movies changed...[ever three days, every four days] practically.... There was: Friday, Saturday, Sunday. Those were the three big days that had the one movie. And then, Monday and Tuesday usually there was like a double feature. And then Wednesday and Thursday there were double features. Those things changed. Initially there were always lots of movies that were being shown. Not like today where they have one movie that’s shown for weeks and weeks on end. The movies were constantly changing.

bc: What was the cost of admission?

LE: I don’t know—Why would I know?! How would I know?! [We both laugh. Because, obviously, LE didn’t pay to see the movies.] It used to kill me—there was another movie theater in town, and it was called the Manos. And the Manos

family is, I believe, originally are up around the Greensburg area. And there was always this big competition between the two [theaters]. The town was too small; the town really could not afford to have two movie theaters....

bc: But in a place like Ellwood City, until TV came in, the movie theater...unless there was also, like, a dance hall....

LE: Oh there was that too. There was the Sons of Italy that had the dances.... In fact, I said to my neighbor, I can remember Ray Anthony coming to town and Skitch Henderson—big name bands at the Sons of Italy.

bc: Is it a big hall?

LE: Very big. And then, too, if someone like Ray Anthony were to come, who had the Italian background, then he ended up at one of the people in town's...they'd go to their place after they had the show and have dinner. And there'd always be some big thing going on, but there were always big name bands that would go up to the Sons of Italy. My father's brother was the President of the Sons of Italy so, with this business...having this movie background...he could have access...and book these different things into the Sons of Italy. Then too the town was booming because it had the mill, the tube mill. Ellwood City is called "The Home of the Seamless Tube." Everybody worked at the tube mill. Down the valley was B and W, but I don't remember the exact name of the mill in Ellwood City. But, everyone worked in the steel mill. And the place was booming.

A friend of mine who is retired and lives in the Phoenix area right now—we get on the telephone and we have these interminably long conversations about remembering Ellwood City. This is, like, our common bond. "Remember when we did this? Remember when we did that?" The kind of crazy things that you could do, you know, in a small town and not have to worry: I mean, we're talking about standing on a corner talking with each other after a football game. And she lived several blocks up the street from me. We would have to...in order to complete our conversations...I'd walk her home...and she'd walk me back...and then I'd walk her back up...and then I'd walk back down. It would be a long time before we'd get home. But we didn't have to worry that somebody was going to spirit us away. It was a safe town. It was a nice town. Everybody knew everybody else.

Where I lived on Perrysville Avenue, it's a terraced place. We had many many steps to go. And, behind my aunt's house, there was a big woods. And next to her house there was also a wooded area. And back, in the woods, was an old stone quarry. And that was one of the excitements about coming to Pittsburgh was to go to Aunt Stella's and "go back the woods," go back to the quarry. And somebody had put one of those big, great big thick ropes with a tire on there and we'd swing on it.

"Oh, where we goin'?!"

"We're goin' out 'up the back!'"

"That's where we're goin'—up the back!"

So we would be up there for hours! We could go back up there and pick wild raspberries. We'd get sent out with pots, and go back up and pick wild raspberries. And we'd be gone for hours; and nobody would worry about us. Now, my cousin told me, you can't go back there because people go back there and do

drugs. And it's just very dangerous. And there was a reservoir that was off to the side. We'd always be fooling around the reservoir too. We were very free: it was a nice life.

bc: You've expressed your feelings about some of the negative ways the city has changed. How has it changed for the better?

LE: The fact that it's smaller. [For me that's a positive though it might not be construed that way for the vast majority of the general population.] I find that everything is pretty accessible for me at this point. I don't have to travel long distances to, say, go to a museum or go to a cultural event. And there certainly are many many wonderful things in this city that a person can avail themselves of. You can be busy every minute of every day with something really worthwhile. But "high tech" seems to be the way to go. So, the city, lacking that (high tech development)--that lack then, of course, takes the life blood of the city away—and that's the young people. My daughter is sort of unusual in the fact that she has chosen to remain here. She left for a while; and she's come back. She said, I like it here. She just bought a house. So she's here to stay.