

Interview with Helen Liskov, by B. Thompson, for the Bridgeport Public Library Oral History Project, Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century, November 21, 1997.

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I: I want to start off by asking you a few questions about when you were younger and how you individually worked hard in the public schools here in Bridgeport and if you could compare the way that you were personally taught when you were in school to the way that you think that you then actually taught other students when you became a teacher.

HL: I taught in the high schools so therefore I shall compare my high school experience as a student and what happened when I taught. I was very impressed with the dedication, the thoroughness that some of these teachers presented. For example, my math teachers, arithmetic teachers because one of the courses I took in those days was commercial arithmetic. Gave us a drill every single day in addition for about five minutes. She would write a number on the board and then we would have to repeat that number and the other and add those and then add the two last numbers until we got ten numbers. That was a test of our ability that was quick and really kept us sharp along those lines.

My history teacher was a very wonderful person in that she made history live for us. She made us feel as if we were part of that time and it was so different from the type of history I had had up to that time. It was when I was a senior and in those days, U.S. history was required. So those are the things that I recall. How important it

is to personalize, make each person feel how important the subject is and the relationship of the subject to the student.

I: Do you feel that there were attempts to kind of Americanize these students while you were going to school? To really focus just on speaking English as opposed to other languages?

HL: No. I didn't have -- . When I was teaching, when I was a counselor I became very involved with students who had just come in and at that time there were no classes for English as a second language and it was my job to try to get these students to feel comfortable in a setting and I would try to arrange periods when other students would be free who were taking the same classes and who could participate in that experience.

I: So, what about when you were a student yourself? When you were in high school or elementary or middle school, did you really witness any real concerted attempts by the teachers to discourage students in their own ethnicity in terms of maybe changing their names or shortening them or -- ?

HL: No, no, no, no. There was a real feeling of understanding and I never felt that there was anything different. As a matter of fact, when I was going to elementary school, I was the only Jewish student, maybe a few, not too many, in the school. We always stayed out for the high holy days and that made me feel different. Not that anybody made me feel different, but I realized that there was something that I was doing that was not the thing that had been done or was being done by others.

I: But there was understanding --?

HL: No, there was no time that I felt that anyone had projected that kind of feeling on me.

I: That's good. At what point in your life did you decide that you wanted to be a teacher?

HL: I think when I was in kindergarten. To me, being a teacher was a lofty position and I had a cousin who was a teacher who taught in New York and whenever she came I just felt as if it were an angel who had come down from heaven. I remember how happy I was when she came. When she left, I cried because she was going. But I always had wanted to be a teacher. I had, as I was growing up, concocted a classroom situation that I created. It wasn't real people. I had a roll book and I had played school with myself so I loved it. To me it was really a beautiful thing to aspire to.

I: I think so, too. You attended the Bridgeport Normal School.

HL: Oh, no. I graduated from high school in February. In those days they had mid-year graduation. It was the time that the University of Bridgeport had opened and I was in the first class. They needed someone to help the Secretary, who was really the most important person. She was the only one in the office. She was the Secretary to the President and she needed someone to help her. They were looking for someone who would be willing to come in and work and receive tuition in payment. Now, they needed money as much as I did and so that was the arrangement that was made. So, I became the stenographer, if you please. That's where my shorthand and typing came in very handy. I helped her and occasionally I would take dictation from the President of the college. At that time, the

University opened in February and for the people in the first class, we would be attending for a year and a half and completing our two year program. (Aside from Sam Liskov: It wasn't the University of Bridgeport then. It was the Junior College of Connecticut, you're right.)

HL: And, at that time, it was the only Junior College in all of New England. It was an unheard of kind of an event. Dr. Cortwright, who had been Superintendent of Schools in Bridgeport, then taught at New York University, decided he would come to Bridgeport and organize a Junior College, so ours was the first one and I was a member of the very first class that graduated. There were thirteen students who graduated from the University of Bridgeport –oh, from the Junior College, excuse me.

I: Were they all studying education as well?

HL: No, no, no, as a matter of fact, they went into dentistry, they went into law and one or two went into business, I think. Obviously, went into teaching, yes.

I: What was your training for being teaching like at this school? What kind of classes do you take?

HL: At the Junior College I took all business and commerce courses, English and that was it. Then I transferred to New York University to the School of Education there. That's where I got my education courses.

I: And what were those education courses like at this time?

HL: Well, I will tell you. It was a lot of book learning that had very little practicality and again, at that time, business teachers were very hard

to find. All the people who had majored in academic subjects were just brought up to do business work. There were no openings. New York City --to become a teacher in New York City was a very tedious and compounded process. I happened to be able to do substituting when I went to NYU and at one school where I substituted, I had a whole week to cover the class while the teacher was out. She left a lesson plan for me and I took the lesson plan and used it. I gave tests every day and graded them and left them for her. Well, evidently it was something that nobody else had done, but remember, I was still playing school and here was an opportunity for me to really be a teacher. So she called attention to the fact that this had been done to the head of the department and there was, what they called, a sabbatical leave of the term that was given to the teacher and when a teacher went on sabbatical to replace her. They called on me and I taught for a whole term. That was the richest educational experience I had in all my years of teaching. The head of the department would come in and visit every single month for a period. Then he would write a report; call me in and he would give me a critique that was so valuable and really, I felt that was the best I had in my total experience.

I: I wanted to talk to you now about how, in Bridgeport, after World War II, and especially after 1965, there was a change from mainly Irish, Italian and Hungarian immigration to the city to a lot of African American and Hispanic immigration and how you think that this change really manifested itself in the school system.

HL: I wasn't teaching in Bridgeport then. Then, I was teaching in Stratford and there, there were black students, but at that time, the curriculum was not what it is today. They had the college preparatory, the scientific, the business and the general course. Most of the people who were in the minority groups were taking general courses. And usually at a low level.

I had a very interesting experience. One of my boys -- at that time I was in guidance -- it was a history teacher who called my attention to the fact that this boy who was in the lowest level was unusual in his ability to relate, to absorb facts and so forth. She thought that he should be upgraded. That was interesting. So I started to do some research on him, called him in and he said that he just loved to read and he would read and he would read the history book and go back and find whatever he could. He was transferred to an upper level. His English teacher thought that maybe he should be raised there, too. It turned out that he became the student who was given the honor of relating the history of the school at graduation. So that was unusual.

Again, the black students who had any potential at all, were being sought by prestigious colleges. I remember that the representative of the University of Connecticut came to me and he said, "Where are your black students? How come we're not getting them?" And I said, "I will tell you something. The black students who can do the work are going to Harvard and to other schools of that kind." I had several who went to Harvard. "You make the mistake by not going to the teachers in the primary grades because by the time

these kids got to third grade, either they felt that they were unable to cope and were lost." The good ones whom the rest of the classes concentrated on. They wanted to elevate them. They became showpieces. And that was one of the tragedies that happened so far as our minority people are concerned. I feel that it must be in the elementary grades, from kindergarten up, with parent involvement, if possible. Now, as a matter of fact, we go to Chautauqua every year. Chautauqua is one of the great learning centers that exists in the United States. We go every summer. President Clinton, who at that time, was not president, he was the principle speaker. Introducing the president was Dukakis, who was going to run for president. Well, the thing was that Clinton started to talk and he talked so long that time that people just gave up. He came to Chautauqua that summer, the end of the summer, and I remember his joking about it. He said, "Well, I learned one thing. I learned that I have to be short in order to keep people's attention." But, he went on to explain what he has done in his state.¹ Once a month, parents must go to school during the day. They must be excused from work. There must be that kind of parent involvement. He said, "I got that idea from Israel. There must be a total child in the picture -- parent, school, child." And that, I think, is something that we should be doing if we want our minority students to really achieve their potential.

I: I wanted to ask you, you mentioned before about how you were one of the first people to start an English as a second language or --?

¹ Bill Clinton was 40th and 42nd Governor of Arkansas, 1983-1992

HL: No, I didn't start an English--. I just --students who came in and I did this very informally. We didn't have too many students who came in. Some of them did very well. Some of them went to Fairfield University at the time they graduated. And some of them had really completed their education and had taken math that was much more advanced than what they had been made to. English was the only thing that was their problem. But, there were very few and they did very well.

I: So, overall, you really didn't see kind of the ethnic or racial mix at school change?

HL: No, not at Stratford.

I: But you also taught at Bridgeport, didn't you?

HL: I taught at Bridgeport but also a very short time. I taught at Bridgeport and then I went on to Stratford as a counselor, yes. And then I, yes.

I: Okay. So it was really mainly at [unclear].

HL: Yes, right.

I: Now I need to ask you a couple of questions that Mary [Mary Witkowsi, Head, Bridgeport History Center] wanted me to. Were you ever involved in the teachers' union at any time?

HL: Yes, I was.

I: And how was that organized?

HL: It was organized by four or five members of the Teachers' Association. The union was sort of the fly that bit the association to get them going. The person who was the president of it, later became the principal of Warren Harding High School, Frank [unclear]. We

were very involved. We would attend board meetings and we really thought we had a function, but as time went on and as the people aspired to higher positions, the union no longer meant as much to them and to all of us, we just folded.

I: Did you ever have any strikes, or --?

HL: Oh, yes. The Teachers' Association had a strike. As a matter of fact, the teachers' Association had a strike and teachers were sent to jail because they were striking. Oh, yes. They had quite a time in jail. We did have one. Don't ask me when.

I: Do you feel that you ever experienced any personal discrimination against you, being a woman, or being Jewish?

HL: No, not in --, no.

I: This is --those are really all the questions I had to ask you [unclear].

HL: Well, that's wonderful. I tell you, I didn't know what you were going to ask, but -- .

I: Oh, I'm sorry. I could have given you some more idea if that would have made it easier.

HL: No, no, it was just very sweet to answer those questions that gave me the chance to remember things and people that I hadn't thought of in a long time.

(Aside from Sam Liskov: Some of it I never heard before either. And we were there in the beginning. We met at the Junior College of Connecticut and Helen graduated in 1929. I graduated in '30. I was in the second class. And then, several years later, I went to law school. They accepted my Junior College work in New York at

NYU. In those days you didn't need a degree to go to graduate school.)

HL: Well, that's very good. I'm glad that it fulfilled your mission.

I: Yes.

HL: Very good.

End of Interview