

Interview with X Part 1

Interviewed by Elise Chenier

Transcribed by Jody Konarski

[00;00;00-00;08;33]

Elise: I think it'll be okay because there's a microphone so I think it should be okay. Okay, I'm just going to say the date. It's July seventeenth, nineteen ninety-six. So when I first came, let me make sure it's rolling and it is, I guess it was January or February and we talked about sort of a lot of things. You gave me a really good overview of your life experience. What I was hoping to do today, and I have a piece of paper here to keep me focused, is to go back to the time you were talking about...now, can you remind me of the...you can use a different name if you want...the woman you lived with most of your life. [Hilda] Hilda, okay. You met Hilda when you were working in the same job?

X: In the same municians plant during the war.

Elise: Right. So if you can go back to talking about starting with when you got that job and tell me about how you met Hilda and how that went.

X: You want me to start there?

Elise: Start with when you first got the job.

X: Well I was in Social work at the time and I had been working with the Big Sister Association. But I was not a fully trained Social Worker, I had taken a summer course at Smith College, North Hampton, Massachusetts. And it was a very good course, it was psychoanalytically oriented so I had quite a bit of insight into the problems that teenage delinquent girls presented. I worked out of the juvenile court building and there was one other woman working in that building, had an office and she was the Social Worker for the court. And we shared the same washroom and we got talking to each other and we got to know each other quite well. Well war broke out and she was invited to

take the position of Director of Personnel for a large war plant in Scarborough, on the outskirts of the city. It was General Engineering Company Limited and was run by two brothers who had been engineers and who had an engineering company but had been requested to start a municians plant during the war and they established it in Scarborough. Now my friend was working there in personnel and we met on the street one day and she said I want you to come and work for me at the war plant. And I had applied to go into the airforce and hadn't had any reply so I thought well I'd like to try it and we had an interview and she accepted me and hired me.

[00;08;34-00;14;06]

X: My first job was employment interviewing and this office was quite a distance from the plant. The plant was out in Scarborough where you had to take a bus; it was very complicated, the timetables for the buses and for the different war workers coming off the ship. The plant employed six thousand women and three hundred men. It was working with detonators and caps for guns and mostly naval torpedoes, that sort of thing. I was put in an office on the tenth floor along with other people from General Engineering in their personnel department to interview people who wanted jobs; filled out applications and as we needed them we called them to come in. I was quite interested; a lot of these women were older, they were fifties and sixties and they had husbands and sons in the war and this was in nineteen forty-two I think. And they wanted to help towards the war work in this way. I would be interviewing them in the office and one of the questions on the interview was if you are employed in this plant is there any one shop, they called them shops, where you would like to work. And quite a lot of these women gave me the same shop number. There was one shop where they wanted to go, they obviously knew someone there or it was a good one. [right] And after a while I became curious about this shop; it intrigued me. I found it was headed up by a woman called Hilda Ricketts or nobody called her that, she was called Ricky. And that she had a very high spirited shop...I suppose about forty or fifty women working in it and they were filling the detonators for naval torpedoes. And she, in order to keep the women's spirits up, she started singing songs and they brought a joke a day to try and have some fun while they were doing this boring work. [yeah] And they liked her, she was a real leader. Actually she had come to Canada from England and she was teaching physical exercises in a group called The Women's League of Health and Beauty, which was started in England. So she landed up in Canada and she

hadn't been here teaching very long and she went into war work. So that was my first meeting with Ricky when I finally got out to the plant I searched out this shop and went to see her and see what it was like, and I met her at that time. But when I really met her and got to know her was when her fiancée who was in the German war prisoner camp; he was one of seven officers who dug a tunnel under the camp to escape, but they were caught and they were all killed, they were all shot. And this news came out in Canada during the day and appeared in headlines in the Toronto Star and his name was up front there. Well I saw this and I knew that her fiancée had been in this camp and that he was one of these men so it was my duty as the personnel to go and see if there was anything I could do to help. But by the time I got to the shop where Ricky was to see her, she had the information. One of the women had seen it. She was out...before she came on ship she had seen the headlines and she brought the information so I didn't have to really tell her very much. I didn't know very much actually, but expressed my sympathy and asked what I could do to help her. And that's how I got to meet, know Ricky. Um...we didn't become friends then, but later, probably six months later, I was appointed Director of Recreation for General Engineering and in the course of my duties I wanted to organize exercise classes on the three different shifts-seven to three, three to eleven, eleven to seven. Because women were complaining that they couldn't fit in to the exercise classes at the Y and other institutions.

Elise: Right.

[00;14;07-00;20;42]

X: So um I was immediately told that this woman Ricky would be a marvelous teacher. She's good and women liked her and so on. So I approached her to see if she would teach classes and she said no she hadn't time. She was already teaching classes downtown on her spare time and she just couldn't undertake anything more. I said that was too bad because so many women told me she was the best and I wanted the best. And I said the head of the cafeteria, which was a huge building-the biggest building in the center, had told me that she would be very glad to have all of the tables and chairs moved out of one end of this building between meals so that Ricky could hold her classes there. And uh..well she went home and thought about it and she was in bed with the flu for a couple weeks and she didn't make her mind up until she got back. Then she said if I wanted to put on the class well she's be

glad to teach it. Of course I offered her money for it too and she needed money. Um...so she did come and teach the classes, whatever shift she happened to be on she would put on a class. They had a pianist and this is [inaudible], she was the head of food services. She was very cooperative, had the cafeteria cleared and it was spotless for the women to exercise. So the program went very well and Ricky and I spent a good deal of time together having coffee before and after these classes, and we got to like each other. Um...there was another little incident in here. I was manning the recreation office when one of the supervisors, usually a man, was a supervisor-he would be an engineer who for some health reason could not go into the army. And sometimes that health reason was instability, drunkenness, you name it. He came to me and said he was going to see Ms. Rickett's, she was home ill...and he knew there were some cheques for her and would I give the cheques and he would deliver them to her. And so I didn't know whether to do it or not and I called up Ricky from her sick bed and asked her about this and she said oh heavens, don't give them to him because he has taken a number of mine already and cashed them and I don't know what to do about it but don't let him have the cheques. So I didn't let him have the cheques and he was very, very a annoyed and threatened to do things about me and my job. Anyway this was one little incident that perhaps brought me and Ricky a little closer, and as I say we became good friends. After the war ended, Ricky was living with a friend on [inaudible] Street over a restaurant. It was a very cramped little room and they lived in bunk beds, one on top of the other and we decided the three of us that we would get accommodation in some other place on the main street and so the three of us went to live on the third floor of an old house on Bernard Avenue. And that was kind of fun because we had to make our own cooking and cleaning up facilities. We got butter boxes from the Dominion store at the corner and we made cupboards for our dishes and that sort of thing and there was a closet in one of the two rooms, a larger room and a smaller room and in the closet of the smaller room we put a two burner grill and our pots and pans and things around. And we cooked all our meals there. And at first we didn't have a refrigerator; we had kind of a cooling cupboard out on the window sill over the roof. And then finally the land lady gave us a shelf over the fridge on the second floor so we were able to make a variety of meals. Anyway, Ruth and Ricky and I lived there for several years and Ricky and Ruth shared a room and I had this little back room where we cooked our meals and uh...I was sick in bed one day with the flu and I just happened to be reading the ads for accommodation, apartments and stuff...rooms. And I saw an ad on Bedford Road which was just around the corner from where we lived; there was an eight-roomed apartment for

rent for a hundred dollars a month. Well I don't know that the rent was actually stipulated in the ad but anyway it was modest rent it said so I had nothing better to do so I got out a pen and paper and wrote a letter in answer to the ad applying to this apartment. I was very surprised about ten days later to have the gentleman phone me who owned it, and say that he would like to interview me; he was interested in my proposal that four of us share this apartment. And so he came to see me even though I was still sick in bed and he learned I was a Social Worker. Well he had been very active in the social planning council of Toronto and knew a lot of Social Workers and he knew a lot of people I knew and he trusted Social Workers, so we got the apartment.

Elise: Wow.

[00;20;43-00;28;04]

X: And that Spring, it was the Spring of forty-nine, Ricky and I had planned to go to England. Her family had lived in England and she hadn't been back since the war ended. So uh we were taking this trip by ship and we were taking a couple of months to visit a lot of England and Scotland and so on. So we weren't really prepared to move that Spring because it was the same Spring we were going abroad and we were saving money like we wanted to go to the Edinburgh Festival and we wanted to see plays and we spent the Winter making hand-made Christmas cards and selling them in order to raise some money.

Elise: Wow.

X: Among our friends was an artist and she did linocuts, three different scenes, and we spent a couple of months in the Fall printing these linoblocks on very good paper and got very good envelope and made quite smart Christmas cards which we sold to our friends. And we had enough money to buy all our tickets at the Edinburgh Festival after working a couple of months. Then in the Spring as I say um we were offered this apartment and we decided to take it and move and let things go and went abroad. I had actually given up my job as a Social Worker at the Children's Aid Society because I wanted more than a month's holiday and at that time they only allowed a month's holiday. I thought well I'll have to resign then. I was so surprised the morning that we moved into this gorgeous apartment on the third story on [inaudible]

Road, one of the old mansions added an addition, making a very large upper story. It had a living room, dining room, kitchen, two big bedrooms, and a smaller room which could be used as a bedroom but we used it as a closet and a place to store clothes and things like that. We moved two or three weeks before we went abroad. We each had a bed, we put that in the apartment. But we had one old rocking chair which my sister had given to me and that's all we had to sit on. And we had some cooking utensils. And we proposed to go off abroad and just leave the apartment furnished in this way. But the landlord was a little upset because he said he wanted carpets on all the floors so that the gentleman below us would not hear all the noise. He said we was an older man and he slept late and he had trouble sleeping and he didn't want him to be disturbed at all. [right] So um there was the problem with carpeting the whole place. Well as it turned out I got some old carpeting that a friend of mine had taken out of her house in Ottawa when she sold it, thinking she might need it some day. I don't know where she stored it but it was full of moths and moths eggs. So we unrolled it in our apartment and we saw what was ahead of us and we rolled it right up again and threw it in the garbage. But we didn't tell our landlord that we didn't have a carpet. He had seen the original roll. And another thing that happened then was that my boss, Stewart Sutton of the Children's Aid, turned up in the morning we moved. He was trying to get me to go back on staff; he was surprised that I had resigned and when he had heard why I resigned he said oh for goodness sakes, why didn't someone tell me. We want to keep her on staff. And so he came over that morning, the morning after we moved. [right] And we hadn't unpacked so we didn't have our nightgowns or anything. We just put on any old thing to go bed. Well I had put my raincoat on when I heard there was somebody at the door and we brought my boss Stewart Sutton in to this one little rocking chair in the living room, the only thing that was there. By the way we had a lovely fireplace there too. And he sat down and I brought in a kitchen chair and wondered what he was going to talk about. So here I was in my raincoat telling him why I had resigned. And he said oh for goodness sakes well when you come back come back right on staff. Come back into the same position you were in, don't worry about that and so on. He said we may even be able to give you a raise. But have a good time and so on...so he brought good news. [yeah] I can tell you briefly the story that for eleven years four of us lived in the apartment and we only paid a hundred dollars a month rent. And this would be in the forties and fifties. Well, late forties, mostly in the fifties. And we enjoyed it. There was one change of personnel because one girl moved to California; she was an English girl who wanted to get to the sun and then one girl moved to New York; she

was a dancer and she was with the Radio City Music Hall. And uh but then we got in two other people and actually the dancer came back later and joined the four of us so we knew each other very well and there were some marvelous episodes in our living there. When we linked up with a bunch of young Dutch engineers who were sent to Canada [inaudible] and they were then going to represent [inaudible] and different countries of the world. So they were very bright knowledgeable young men and they had no place to go except the place...the cheap rooms. And I discovered this one night, I had gone to a dinner party and met one of them. And returning home somebody asked me if I could drive him home because he lived near me. And I found out he lived a few doors away, and I said look we have a coffee pot on every night about ten thirty and come on in any time you like. Well from then on he came very night with his friends.

[00;28;05-00;35;19]

X: And so we had kind of little parties every night. [yeah] And it was one of them was an academic, he was teaching at the university in mathematics and it was a good, interesting group and we had fun with them because we sometimes went out with them to shows or we went out hiking sometimes with them too. Now Ricky and I were getting to know each other better but we weren't in love...we weren't a couple. But we were very fond of each other; we didn't share a room. We each had different roommates, but we did fall in love and then of course we had a problem because it's very difficult to be in love with somebody among four people. There's no privacy whatsoever. So our relationship didn't develop into a full lesbian relationship as I see it now in my old age. I didn't know anything about lesbians in those days. And these feelings I had, I did not identify. I had no basis on which to identify. I never heard of a lesbian in those days. [right]

Elise: Did it concern you that you were developing feelings for Hilda, did that concern you?

X: It did not concern me, no, mind you I didn't tell everybody about it. I didn't tell my parents, but I did take Ricky home on weekends and I think they were quite aware of the fact that we were really close. But I don't think they knew as much as I did about how lesbians behaved. [right] I didn't know much, so our relationship grew but it was not a passionate relationship because we couldn't shack up anytime we wanted...there were great gaps. Even when we

went on holidays we almost always went on a motor trip where we shared expenses with other people, so uh, it was a very slow relationship developing there. Now one of the things that happened I remember was that Ricky, who I think was more heterosexual than I, she had been engaged to this chap who was killed in camp. And they had been in love. She also had gone out with some other men and one of these men had married, but he used to come to Toronto on business and he would phone her up to take her out for dinner. Well, he also invited her to go away with him a couple of weekends, and she did one weekend go away and that very very much disturbed me because now she was getting back into the heterosexual relationship again. And also, I was full of guilt of course. I was the daughter of a missionary, the minister, principal of the girl's school and so on and who would be shocked at lesbian behavior...perhaps would have never heard of them....he just didn't know those things as a minister. [yeah] Anyway, um, excuse me I've just lost my train of thought...well Ricky never went out with him again. She saw, I think, how I felt but what I was really going to say was that I had so much guilt over our relationship even though it was simply just mutual petting, that's all it was...it wasn't the passionate relationship. But I was guilty, felt very guilty about it and my reasons for feeling that guilt, as you know, go back a long way to when I was raped when I was eight. And that particular incident, plus the fact that my parents never knew about it, plus the fact that my mother started to pay a lot of attention to me and be with me and try to encourage me to learn poetry and things like that. So she must have recognized that I had a problem of sorts. She didn't know what it was but she saw that I needed her and she got closer to me in that period. And from then on she was always very close to me and very...she confided in me her feelings and so on. In fact she felt that she should never have married a minister and so on. But I was, I felt a lot of guilt even about this very casual kind of lesbian relationship, so that when Ricky kind of broke the rules in a way, informally, I took that as an excuse for cutting off any activity on my part. This was temporary but it lasted for six months or so and I think it did affect the relationship. It put a damper on it in a way. [sure] Nevertheless, we stuck together; we were still best friends and at one point in the fifties when the other two girls-one decided to get married and the other one to move leaving the two of us in this four-roomed apartment, my father said to me you know Helen, why don't you buy a house or get some money down on a house because it's the only way you'll ever save. You know, you'll never save this way, you're spending all you're earning. [right]

[00;35;20-00;40;03]

X: So I never thought my father would ever recommend spending money but he did. So we decided we would look for a house and we were very fortunate, we found a small house in Northeast Rosedale; white stucco and a floor and a half as it were and it was just right for two people. And we bought it. We turned in a couple of new insurance policies we had bought and my father loaned us the down payment really and enough to cover what we owed for maybe five or six years. I was always paying him back but he still loaned us the money to get started. And so we lived in this house for quite a number of years, for about fifteen sixteen years before we decided to move up in the scale to buy another house, a bigger one in a different area. And during this time we were living together I changed jobs and started to work for CBC and for them I did some traveling and I took a trip to Japan; I was away for about six weeks. And this started a pattern of my leaving Ricky alone when I went off on these trips. And she naturally had her friends that she fraternized with while I was away. I don't know whether or not she had any affairs; I think perhaps she did. But that's not definite and it doesn't matter too much anyway because I would come back and we would be together again. But we were not active sexually in this period. In fact we were never active sexually again. We were just very good friends and worked well together and shared a house together very well. But there was another problem in that I was always making more money than she was and therefore had to pay more into the mortgage and that sort of thing and we couldn't afford to do things that we would have liked to to improve the house. Excuse me do you want me to just ramble on?

Elise: No, this is fine, maybe I'll ask you a couple questions about some of the things that you've said.

X: I need to focus in more on our relationship and yet...

Elise: No, no, no this is good and you really are telling me quite a lot too and we are running out of time so we will go for maybe another twenty minutes? I mean there is so much there; I mean, you give so much detail. [too much] No I mean it is wonderful. It's absolutely not too much, it's really really wonderful. And so I'm really enjoying just listening to you. Maybe you can tell me, after the war you went to work for CAS. What did Hilda do? Or Ricky, what did Ricky do?

X: Well she ah had to get trained in a new work because municians plant was not a job really. Ricky decided to take a course in graphic...she analyzes data from...for exploration firms, for firms that are looking for gold and silver and precious metals. [oh] What do you call a person who analyzes that data?

[00;40;04-00;46;21]

X: Plotter, she was a data analyzer, I guess I'll have to say it that way.

Elise: Was this part of a government sponsored re-training program or something?

X: No it wasn't. She got a job with someone she knew and sort of apprenticed and worked for the Dominion Gulf Company, which was exploring in Northern Ontario looking for precious metals or oil, anything...so she choose to go into this field. And she was one of the first women that I'd ever heard of to do it. She analyzed data that was recorded on a machine on the bottom of an airplane which flew over the land and took photographs of what the machine was telling it what was in the ground below. So when the plane would finish its work for the day it would have hundreds of these strips of film showing the readings, chemical readings on the film for the ground that was below where the plane had flown over. Through that data, through mathematical means they were able to trace where there was valuable material either metals or oil or whatever. Ricky got apprenticed and learned that technique and later on she trained a lot of other people, but she worked there at Dominion Gulf until they discovered, I think they discovered gold up North. Of course what they did was packed up all their business and went back to the States. Once they found what they were looking for, they staked it all out and started to explore that ground and take out of it whatever they saw what was in it. And Ricky then went to another company; I don't know how many companies she worked for but they were all in the explorations business and it grew and grew and she became, because she was the eldest person doing it I guess, she became one of the most expert and she trained a lot of other women. And um...she also went to work for a man that had been her manager in one place and he had his own business and he called her and said would you come and work for me so she went and worked for him. So she was a good...she was good at this work, this plotting...they do it in now quite a different way, but that's the way they had to do it in those days. That was her...and she stayed in that business until her retirement, working for the last ten or fiftenn years for this boss whom she had associated with in

another firm earlier. And she met a lot of her very good friends in that business. We were still living together sharing houses. We finally bought a house in the east end of Toronto in [inaudible] Park. We had an apartment in it, a two bedroom apartment, and we had a two bedroom apartment for ourselves. I was teaching by this time. I had left the CBC and had gone back to do graduate work at university and then I taught at Ryerson Polytechnic Institute. I taught a course which I was able to organize myself called Media and Society. And I was making a good salary so I was able to afford a car now and the expenses of a big house like that. [right] The mortgage was high, it was much too high and after I think only three years we decided, I decided that I couldn't afford that kind of mortgage and we'd had trouble with our tenants, the first tenants we'd had trouble with and one of them brought in his mother to live there and she was an alcoholic so we really had problems. And the second tenants who were friends of Ricky's, they bought the hotel and the Marathon Hotel and Grand [inaudible]. So they left to run the hotel and at that point we decided this was a good chance to sell the place and we were looking for a small bungalow. Well, we sold it and we couldn't find the small bungalow but we found a nice apartment in Rosedale and this apartment had was built into a hill so it had four stories at the back and eight stories at the front. And we were at the back on an apartment where you had to walk out to a garden. We had our own private garden, it was fenced in.

[end of tape]