



A project of the Professional Staff Congress Archives Committee

**Interview with Lilia Melani**  
**Interviewed by Irwin Yellowitz**

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[Start of recorded material at 00:00]

- Irwin Yellowitz: Today is May 22, 2019. I'm Irwin Yellowitz, and I will be interviewing Lilia Melani on behalf of the PSC Archives Committee. Lilia, let's begin with the usual question.
- Lilia Melani: Yes.
- Irwin: Your family background and your educational background.
- Lilia: My parents, both Italian immigrants. What makes them a little unusual is that they were from Tuscany, not the southern –
- Irwin: Not southern Italy.
- Lilia: Not southern Italy. We owned an Italian restaurant.
- Irwin: Did you?
- Lilia: Yes, that my parents started.
- Irwin: Do you cook Italian food to this day?
- Lilia: Well, somewhat. No, my parents were the cooks. They were both very good cooks.
- Lilia: So my education: grew up in New Kensington, a small city outside Pittsburgh, moved to Pittsburgh for junior high school and high school, bachelor's and master's in English from the University of Pittsburgh, PhD in English from Indiana University at Bloomington.
- Irwin: And how did you get from the Midwest to the CUNY faculty?
- Lilia: Well, first of all, I did not know Pittsburgh was Midwest until I came to New York; I thought it was the East Coast. We were, after all, one of the original 13 colonies. But once I got here, I didn't have a job. I came with a car and \$100 and stayed with a friend, who told me that I could sleep on her couch. What she didn't tell me – and this was my introduction to New

York--what she didn't tell me was that she and her husband were leaving, they were going to Europe, and they were living with her neighbor who had a studio apartment. So he was sleeping, Jerry was sleeping on the box spring, they were sleeping on the mattress on the floor, and I slept on the couch.

I had never met this man, but there I was, a guest of his guests. And when Joan and her husband left for Europe, I was left with Jerry, who was gay, and I stayed on. And his lover, who was in the army in Greenland, was ecstatic because my staying there meant that Jerry would not be going out to the bars. So that was my introduction to New York. I felt very sophisticated. And very grown up. There was a strike. I couldn't get a job, worked for *Time Magazine*, really as a glorified typist, sent out résumés, and Brooklyn College hired me.

- Irwin: What year was that approximately?
- Lilia: Sixty-two. They hired me in the fall of '63.
- Irwin: That, of course, was a period when hiring in higher education throughout the nation was extensive.
- Lilia: Yes. It was expanding. Luck was with me in my career. I have to say that. At another time I wouldn't have gotten hired, and who knows? I might still be at *Time Magazine*.
- Irwin: Well, maybe not, but you wouldn't be necessarily at Brooklyn College.
- Lilia: No.
- Irwin: So you remained at Brooklyn College through your career?
- Lilia: For my entire career.
- Irwin: And when did you retire?
- Lilia: About three years ago. Three or four years ago.
- Irwin: Oh, so you had a very long –
- Lilia: Very long career. I was there almost 60 years. But I also worked as an adjunct once I retired fulltime. Which was an ecstatic thing to do for me, because I would never have to read another freshman composition. Never.
- Irwin: You were teaching more advanced courses?
- Lilia: As an adjunct I was teaching film and literature.
- Irwin: So this is obviously an interest of yours.
- Lilia: Yes.
- Irwin: All right, so now, in the 1960s, you came to CUNY at Brooklyn College, and then you joined the UFCT, the United Federation of College Teachers, which was headed by Israel Kugler, and which was originally part of the United Federation of Teachers but in 1963 became an independent union, and was organizing in higher education, including CUNY. Now, why did you join the UFCT?
- Lilia: I had been asked many times to join the union, and just couldn't imagine doing it, saw no reason to do so. Went to numerous parties. The English Department was kind of like a little

hotbed of union organizing at Brooklyn College. But then in 1969 the contract was signed. The contract – so that my salary went from \$3,000 a year to \$11,000 a year. And in gratitude and in support I joined the union. I felt the least I could do for having gotten this gigantic change in my lifestyle, where I no longer had to be on Medicare – Medicaid, actually. So I joined the union. And I thought that was all I had to do; that my obligation to the union was to pay my dues, and that's it. It didn't turn out that way.

Irwin: Not at all, not at all. So you were not active in the union before 1969.

Lilia: No, I wasn't.

Irwin: Now, between 1969 and 1972 the UFCT was in competition with the Legislative Conference, the other faculty body, headed by Belle Zeller, and you were very active in those years. Could you tell us something about what you did and why you did it?

Lilia: Yes. That's all very clear to me. We got a contract, and I read the contract, and saw what rights I had. Now, when I – when there was no contract, when I was a lecturer, which the university called the fluid bottom, that rank, which meant we were dispensable, had no rights, now there was a contract, and I had rights, and I wanted to know what my rights were. So I read the contract from one end to the other, and then it wasn't being observed. I have no idea why, but the university decided that one category of lecturers, who were fulltime by the standards of their department, would not get the \$11,000 for a year. I was in that category; there were only about 50 of us. I have no idea – anyway. And I kept reading that, and I kept saying: How can this be? They signed a contract. How can they not observe it? And I became obsessed. I think it was all I talked about for months. And I got angrier, and powerless, and depressed. So I thought I have to do something about this.

I knew that the union was in need of workers, so I volunteered to help out. And so I volunteered to take notes at grievances. Well, there were so few activists at that time that they didn't need somebody taking notes at grievances; they needed counselors to represent people at grievances. So I quickly became a grievance counselor, and saw all these injustices and violations of people's rights. So although I was a grievance counselor, it wasn't enough; I was still angry and depressed. So I became an officer at the chapter. And that wasn't doing it. There was still all this injustice going on. So I also became an officer – a grievance counselor at the local and an officer in the local. That was how it all came about. And I would say for the university that if they had paid that little group of lecturers their measly \$8,000 a year for that one year I would never have gotten active in the union, and there would've been no class action suit later. It cost them tens of millions.

Irwin: Well, that was a big mistake. A big mistake. Now you normally would go to the UFCT [United Federation of College Teachers] because lecturers were represented in that unit.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: There were two units.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And the UFCT [United Federation of College Teachers] represented lecturers. So that was your –

Lilia: Lecturers fulltime and part-time.

Irwin: Yeah,

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Now you're active in the UFCT, and we move to 1972. And in April 1972, the UFCT [United Federation of College Teachers] and the LC [Legislative Conference], which had been competing since those initial contracts in 1969, merged.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Now, did you favor that merger at the time?

Lilia: I thought it had to be; that the two couldn't survive fighting each other. That it made sense for them to be one. And it was clear that although the LC [Legislative Conference], started out priding itself on not being a union, circumstances forced it to become a union. It had no choice. In order to represent the people within its bargaining unit, it had to be more and more union. Lobbying was not going to do it. So I supported the merger.

Irwin: Now the merger took place, and the terms of the merger were that Belle Zeller would be president of the merged union, now called the Professional Staff Congress.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Israel Kugler would be deputy president.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And there would be a one-year interim period during which these two people would hold these offices. The remaining offices were split between the two groups.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And in 1973 there would be an election — for a more permanent three-year term.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Did you talk with Iz Kugler about why he accepted this arrangement, which made him deputy president and not president?

Lilia: No. While I respected and admired Iz, we never really talked much. I mean — I was not one of the people in his circle. So, no.

Irwin: Okay, so you don't know about why —

Lilia: I know nothing —

Irwin: he made that decision.

Lilia: I'm sure it was inevitable [that he would see] the same thing. I always thought it was a mistake that he didn't hold out to be co-president.

Irwin: At that time?

Lilia: At that time. Yeah.

Irwin: He told me personally — and I wonder if he told you the same thing — that Belle Zeller, who was much older than he, promised him that after that one year interim period in which she was president and he was deputy president, that she would step out and he would become the president of the union. Did he ever relate that story to you?

Lilia: I have no memory of that.

Irwin: Because he told that to me, until he died in the 1990s.

Lilia: I would say that Belle Zeller was always grooming Irwin Polishook. That would be based on my observation and memories. And that he presented himself to being groomed.

Irwin: Yes, I would agree with that. He was the first vice-president.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: in the LC, and then again in the interim year. And I agree with that. But I want, for the record, to state that Israel Kugler believed that he had been –

Lilia: Promised that –

Irwin: misled by Belle Zeller. And this led to a contested election in 1973. Now we have two slates, the LC people and the UFCT people, running for the leadership of this new Professional Staff Congress.

Lilia: What you also had were two views of unionism. And some sort of schism was inevitable; it just happened very quickly within that one year.

Irwin: I think it was an inheritance from the earlier period, as in the sixties. Iz Kugler had believed very strongly that any higher education union must be part of the labor movement. And as you had mentioned, the LC was not even a union –

Lilia: No.

Irwin: in those days.

Lilia: No.

Irwin: And when it did become a union, it joined the NEA, National Education Association, which was not part of the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations]. So there was a very sharp difference between them on that issue.

Lilia: And among us, among the officers of the merged PSC [Professional Staff Congress]. And I remember being told by the exec [executive director] – I was someone who wanted to fight every grievance. If there was any violation, we should fight it. We should defend that person. And I remember – it was very enlightening to me, it opened my eyes politically – being confronted one evening by a very angry director – I’ve forgotten what his title was. Arnold Cantor.

Irwin: He was the executive director.

Lilia: Thank you. The executive director. And he said to me, very angrily, so I must’ve really gotten his goat because he was really a very controlled political man. And he said, “You make my job difficult. You make it impossible. Because you fight everything, I have nothing left to trade with.” I never forgot that. And I saw the union very differently, and what goes on. I was not willing to be part of that. I wanted to defend every right, even though I knew that many of our grievants had precipitated their problems. Had they acted with some tact, with some judgment, with less narcissism, less insensitivity, they would not have been fired, for instance. But their rights had been violated; those rights had to be defended. So – but that was not everybody’s view of what a union was.

Irwin: Yes, probably not on the LC side.

Lilia: Not on the LC side.

Irwin: So we come –

Lilia: And not even, I would say, on the UFCT side either. Not necessarily.

Irwin: Okay, we come to the election of 1973.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Belle Zeller ran against Israel Kugler in that election. Now they're running for a three-year term as president.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: It was a bitter election, and Belle won it by 200 votes.

Lilia: Yeah.

Irwin: But there was a third candidate in that election. A man named Edgar Pauk.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And I wonder if you remember him.

Lilia: Very clearly.

Irwin: Good.

Lilia: I occasionally run into him.

Irwin: Oh, you do?

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: I was wondering what happened to him. But he played an important part in union history because he ran as a third candidate, and he drew 300 votes.

Lilia: He defeated us. Yes. He defeated my slate. No question.

Irwin: Do you agree that that was the case? Because Iz maintained it –

Lilia: No question.

Irwin: to the end of his life that those

Lilia: He was correct.

Irwin: were his 300 votes and he would've won that election.

Lilia: And I think that some people didn't vote because they were turned off by the charges that Pauk was making on information he had received from Tony DeMelas.

Irwin: Okay. Do you know the issue between Edgar Pauk and Iz Kugler that led him to run against – Iz and create that victory for Belle Zeller?

Lilia: The way you've asked the question I can't really answer it, because I don't think the issue is what caused – this is my view – is not what caused Edgar to run. Ambition caused him to run. And the issue was an opportunity. And he thought that he could parlay that into winning the election and the presidency.

Irwin: So he really thought he would be able to defeat – Iz Kugler and Belle Zeller and win the election?

Lilia: I think so.

Irwin: Oh, so it was not to get revenge against Iz for whatever differences they had at the time, that I don't know what they were?

Lilia: The reason I'm being silent is I'm – I've never thought that. I can only say that was not anything I was aware of at the time. It's not how I saw it at the time. Tony DeMelas was angry. I don't remember what the issue was, but it was something – I don't remember. I'm sorry.

Lilia: But I don't think – I don't think that Edgar ran out of revenge.

Irwin: Okay.

Lilia: Ambition, yes.

Irwin: He would've been a long shot for him to win that election, because he was a relatively unknown person and he was running against perhaps the two best known union people in CUNY; Belle Zeller, who goes way back to the 1940s with the LC, and then – Iz Kugler, who was the head of UFCT.

Lilia: Of course that is one of the issues – there's another way of looking at that. Which is implicit in what you just said, which is they go back a long way. CUNY was expanding and had lots of young faculty.

Irwin: Yes, it did.

Lilia: And lecturers could vote.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: So that Edgar could very well think that he would appeal to the younger junior faculty, and that these old-timers had had their day.

Irwin: Okay, that's a very interesting point of view, which I had not heard from Israel Kugler, by the way.

Lilia: Well, I

Irwin: He did not believe that for a moment. But of course he was bitter against Edgar Pauk, because whatever Edgar's motivation, in the end it turned out that his candidacy defeated Israel.

Lilia: Yes, it did. And it should also be said that I think the dream of Israel Kugler's life was to be president of a union.

Irwin: Absolutely.

Lilia: And of this union.

Irwin: Yes, of this one.

Lilia: So – and it was so close. Can I tell the story of the convention?

Irwin: Sure, tell away.

Lilia: Because I would like – since I'm not a historian or a political scientist I look at the human, people, as much as events. And I think that often gets left out of history. And – Iz Kugler, although he was a little tattered and worn with all of the political fights he had engaged in, some compromises he probably had to make along the way, he was essentially a very decent, moral man. And Edgar Pauk ran on information he had gotten from Tony DeMelas. And Tony had been fired from City College, and they were at a convention together – you may have even been at that convention.

Irwin: I may have.

Lilia: When the loss was announced. And Iz had just learned that he had lost, his dream would never come true; the dream of a lifetime was shattered. And Tony DeMelas, who was a brilliant grievance counselor – he saw the issues, he was fantastic. He had been offered a job as a grievance counselor by the AFT [American Federation of Teachers], I think it was. And he, at that moment, approached Iz and asked Iz to recommend him for the job, because that would assure his getting the job. And you have to see that this is a man whose dream had been shattered being asked to help the man who helped the shatterer. And he wrote the letter. [Tony got the job.]

Irwin: That, I think, is an important statement about Iz Kugler's character.

Lilia: The magnanimity of that, it moves me to tears to this day, because there are very few people who have that kind of stature, who would do that.

Irwin: Well, good, I'm very happy you put that story into the record. After the election, we had this three-year period, and the union was divided. Although –Iz had lost by this narrow margin, the Executive Council was divided about two-thirds Belle Zeller people and one-third Iz Kugler people. And the Delegate Assembly about the same. So for that three-year period it was a divided leadership. And of course the fiscal crisis came, and we were fighting for our lives, and here the union had this divided leadership. Now, you played a role in those years, because I remember that quite plainly. You were one of the leaders of the UFCT group in the Executive Council and the Delegate Assembly. So what led you to continue this leadership even after Iz Kugler's defeat?

Lilia: I had been elected, there were people out there who believed in me and the values I represented, and I had an obligation to represent them and the values they had voted for. And I also felt a responsibility also; I had accepted this position. I had run, and I should stay there and defend and represent those values. Also –

Irwin: Yes, we took a moment's break there. We're talking about the 1973/76 period, and why you were very active in leadership during that period.

Lilia: Also, I was a very active, committed feminist. And much of the Delegate Assembly and the executive committee [Executive Council] were very sexist, and I knew that some of them were people with whom I had brought grievances or represented women in another context

for their sexist values and their sexist treatment of women. So I was also there to defend women, and to push the union to fight for women.

Irwin: Okay, we'll come to that in just a few minutes when we talk about what is called the Melani Case, quite appropriately, but let's do just a little more on the union.

Lilia: Okay.

Irwin: In 1976, Iz Kugler ran again for president. This time Belle Zeller had retired and the other candidate was Irwin Polishook.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: In that election, Iz lost rather badly, and he disbanded his caucus.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: At that point many of the people in that caucus joined the Irwin Polishook caucus, and within a few years the distinction between UFCT and LC people had vanished.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And it didn't come back until the 1990s when the New Caucus appears. So there was a period of about 15 years with one leadership group.

Lilia: Yes. And I would say that Iz continued to support the union and be active in it.

Irwin: Yes, he did. Yes, he did. Do you have any thoughts about how Iz felt after that 1976 election?

Lilia: No, I don't. I can imagine that –

Irwin: You don't recall his –

Lilia: I can imagine that – no, he –

Irwin: I can imagine it too, but –

Lilia: He wasn't one to reveal his feelings, to bare his soul.

Irwin: No, you're quite right. As I knew him for so many years he was a very introspective person.

Lilia: You knew him much better than I as a person. I knew him as a union leader.

Irwin: Before we leave the union for the moment, is there anything you want to say about Iz in general? You've told the story of his character with Tony DeMelas; of his desire to be the president and the shattered dreams in 1973, and then again in 1976. But what about Iz as a person who you knew for at least a decade?

Lilia: As I say, I didn't really know [Iz Kugler] as a person so much as a union leader. And I think granting – when he got active at what was New York City Community College then, he was a man of courage. I guess that's – that's what I have to say – and I think very loyal. He always kept Irving [Panken] with him.

Irwin: Yes, that was his director of organization.

Lilia: Yes. And he kept close ties with the UFT [United Federation of Teachers]. Shanker, although in the background, was very helpful to the survival of the UFCT.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: I know that isn't quite what you asked.

Irwin: It leads to the next question. What contribution do you see the UFCT as having made in its history? It lasted, as an organization, from 1963 to 1972, the merger, and then as a caucus within the union until 1976. So what contribution over that long period of time do you think it made to unionism in CUNY?

Lilia: I have no – to unionism in CUNY? Not the terms I think in. What I think it did is that it gave lecturers protection and rights, full and part time; it gave lecturers, we the *fluid bottom*, it gave us a form of contractual tenure. Some of us were grandfathered in with tenure, so we had rights. We suddenly got – could have pensions, we could have medical insurance. And this was a group of thousands of employees who had nothing before. So I think that was its large contribution. In addition to which – and we wouldn't have had – we'd been in a bargaining – this is my belief. Had there been one bargaining unit, had the lecturers had the misfortune to be in the bargaining unit with the LC, we would've gotten little, if anything. We would've been something that could be bargained away. We would be bargaining chips.

In addition to which – as a grievance counselor I often worked with Steve Vladeck, who was the UFCT attorney and a very foremost labor attorney. And we had this contract, and it had been signed, negotiated by Vladeck and Iz Kugler, who were experienced, and negotiated it for the university where vice-chancellors were unfamiliar with this type of contract in labor. So we got a contract, and then the university discovered what it had signed; what it had given away; what rights it had given us. And then, it began fighting, and challenging, and making us go fight grievances and go to arbitration, hoping to bankrupt us. It would've bankrupted us. And I remember sitting once with – in Steve Vladeck's company, and his saying, "We pushed the UFCT contract further than it was ever meant to go." That is the real contribution. I can go on, because I –

Irwin: They learned from that, because in the first contract negotiated by the PSC now, in 1972, the university was obdurate about almost everything. And that was the one where we voted for strikes twice –

Lilia: Yes, yes.

Irwin: and eventually the contract was settled because the mediators came down with a decision from the Public Employment Relations Board, which was very favorable to the union. And the New York Times and the public said, well, why are we going to have a strike in the university, and the management is being impossible on this. And they gave in, and they –

Lilia: Yeah.

Irwin: We signed the first PSC contract in 1973.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: But what you say about 1969, I think, was absolutely true.

Lilia: 1969/1970, '71, yes.

Irwin: Yes, absolutely.

Lilia: Those were tough times. And there were times when it looked like the UFCT team might go under. That was a possibility. You couldn't say no, it could never happen.

Irwin: Yes, those were – it was a tough period. The UFCT was being financed by the UFT

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: and the LC was being financed by the NEA [National Education Association]. And, actually, the merger took place in large part because those two bodies, the UFT and NEA, merged in New York State to form NYSUT [New York State United Teachers].

Lilia: Mm-hmm.

Irwin: And here was this CUNY competition going on, and they said no, this can't continue, and they just said if you don't stop the fighting and merge, we're going to pull the money out.

Lilia: And the purse strings always win.

Irwin: They did in that case.

Lilia: Maybe not always, but

Irwin: No, but they did then.

Lilia: Powerful force.

Irwin: They did then. Okay, I'd like to move on now to the Melani case. It's named after you.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: I know you were not the only person involved in it, but you were the leader throughout, and so I think it's appropriate that it's known that way.

Lilia: Thank you.

Irwin: When did you believe that – well, I guess you've already said that you felt that women were not being treated fairly –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: in the university, even when you were a grievance counselor for UFCT. But at what point did you believe that you could prove this in such a way that you would convince CUNY to change its policies?

Lilia: Well, first of all, I was not interested in changing CUNY's policies. I wanted to transform the very nature of the power structure. I wanted to transform the distribution of power within the university. Policy would then come out of that. It was more radical than – it was – a result – I knew that women were being discriminated against. I could see it. It was clear. It was everywhere. One of my colleagues, or my office mate, in fact, Kay Rogers – the university had a rule at that time that if a woman became pregnant she should immediately tell her chairperson, who would force her, then, to go on administrative leave. And if she did not have tenure, her tenure was broken, and she had to start de novo. That happened to her two times. So instead of getting tenure in four years, it took her 11. And in her first forced maternity leave she wrote a book on misogyny in literature because she was so angry. So I could see it in the woman who had the desk next to me – what was happening to women.

But what made me think about fighting the university was my experience in the union. Because as a result of that, I could see that the problem was systemic. It was not just immediately around me, it was not a few people, it was inherent in the very institution and its bylaws, and its past practices. In addition to which it enabled me to know women – first of all, I also saw what the laws were, [what] the rules were [that were] supposed to govern the university, and then how it actually functioned. They're not always the same. They can be different. And I also knew people through my union work at every branch of CUNY, which was invaluable in organizing. I don't want to go into all of the details. But I called together with Renate Bridenthal – you would know her as a historian – at Brooklyn College, and we called together women from all branches of CUNY.

And by this incredible coincidence, we were meeting at the Graduate Center, which was then on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. And that same evening, in the same building, that the UFCT people were meeting, women were meeting, Beryl Weinberg, who worked for the LC, who was a feminist, had called together women with the LC, and they were meeting that same evening. Somebody at that meeting said, "Hey, there are women meeting downstairs. We should join them." So the LC women came down and joined the UFCT women, and we were women. There was no LC, there was no UFCT. And what Beryl had done, which was shrewder on her part than I was at that point, she had invited Dee Alpert, who was a NOW [National Organization for Women] discrimination counselor, and Dee was at their meeting; she came down also.

And Dee started talking about the fact that Title VII was going to go into effect in May, and now it was illegal to discriminate against women. Until that Title VII went into effect, it was perfectly fine to discriminate against women. And with Title VII coming in, the women, with Dee Alpert, the LC women, the UFCT women, we formed the CUNY Women's Coalition. We elected – found a name for ourselves--we elected an executive committee and we decided we would bring a class action suit against the university. Because Dee was there and told us about it. I knew about the rules – and there were women there like Isabelle Krey, who were powerful.

Irwin: Kingsborough.

Lilia: Grievance counselor – yes, Kingsborough.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: I mean she was indefatigable, and undefeatable. There were wonderful women there. And it also gave me a belief that democracy can work. Because here was this group of women who were about 45 to 50 of us there, and from listening to women talk, all these strangers elected a very powerful – they elected appropriate leaders. Three people were elected to the executive committee. Isabelle Krey, Ruth Cowan, who was from New York City Technical, and me. And that was it. We started getting ready for the class action suit.

Irwin: How did you get the information that you needed for the suit?

Lilia: Public documents. Information. Spent a lot of time going through catalogues, through Chancellor's Reports, department lists. Also, women helped. There were women who provided information from different branches.

Irwin: Did you get any resistance from the university as you were trying to gather this information?

Lilia: Well, yes. Renate Bridenthal had been working with a City councilwoman, Carol Greitzer, who was a very strong feminist. And Carol Greitzer had gotten an appointment with the chancellor, who was then Kibbee. She took Renate –

Irwin: Robert Kibbee, yes.

Lilia: Yes. And Renate invited me. And Carol Greitzer had a whole plan. I was just there along for the ride at this point. And she had an idea that an advisory committee of women, elected by the women on each campus, should be formed by the chancellor in order to investigate the status of women. Well, an administrator would have to be soft-headed to do that. That would not be in his interest. What the chancellor did do was create the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on the Status of Women, which was a blue ribbon panel, of handpicked – as Dee Alpert said, handpicked handmaids. He thought.

Irwin: Was that panel all women?

Lilia: It was all women.

Irwin: The blue ribbon panel?

Lilia: Yes, it was all women. It was headed by [Marilyn] Gittell, who was a strong, feisty – she was a fighter, a scholar, and a woman of integrity. She found discrimination everywhere in CUNY. So it backfired.

Irwin: So that committee reinforced your conclusions?

Lilia: But at the time it didn't look like that. It ultimately turned out that way, and when she testified in court, when we went to court in 1983<sup>1</sup>, her testimony was very important to our case. However, at the time we were enemies, because we saw each other – the committee saw us, the Chancellor's Advisory Committee and Gittell – we had a meeting. Saw us as now superfluous. We saw them as traitors. So we fought each other. When they held hearings we told women not to testify. The CUNY Women's Coalition told women not to testify at the Chancellor's Advisory Committee. And there was reason for that in that they did not ask for protection for the women who testified. And some of the women were injured as a result of that.

Irwin: There was retribution.

Lilia: There was, oh, yeah. There was retribution. However, they put out a 250-page report, and which could be summed up in the sentence, "There is discrimination against women in every aspect at every level in the university." So at the end we reinforced each other.

Irwin: Did they propose a solution for this?

Lilia: Yes, they had suggestions. Yeah.

Irwin: They

Lilia: Gittell was too shrewd a woman, they were all too smart not to do that.

Irwin: And what did they propose?

Lilia: Oh, I can't remember. The same things we were. It's a long time ago. That report came out in '73.

Irwin: Oh, in '73, that's early.

Lilia: It was early. Maybe '74.

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<sup>1</sup> The audio interview incorrectly stated 1984 as the year they went to court. The correct year is 1983 as amended in the transcript.

Irwin: Okay, so after that report you continued your efforts. Now this is during the fiscal crisis, and many women were losing their jobs if they were not tenured, and of course many were not, because they had been hired later than the men in the department.

Lilia: Well, it was more than that. It was also – remember there was the tenure quota?

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: The policy of the tenure quota.

Irwin: Short-lived, but it was there for a while.

Lilia: And the union fought that.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: And more women were fired than men, particularly in proportion to their numbers in relationship to men. And that was one of our charges. One of the causes of action in the class action suit. And also, what I would say is as a result of the union I knew Judy Vladeck, who – we needed a lawyer.

Irwin: Right, she will come into this picture in just a minute.

Lilia: Fine, okay. A wonderful woman.

Irwin: Yes. So you concluded that during the fiscal crisis that the layoffs of women were not simply by seniority.

Lilia: Oh, no.

Irwin: It was –

Lilia: No.

Irwin: It was – there was a gender aspect as well.

Lilia: And built into the quota system were ways out. There were exemptions. There were exceptions, which could be used. And they were used throughout. And it was a good time for department chairmen – and there were mostly *chairmen* in those days – to settle old scores, to get rid of people they didn't want, to get rid of departments. Murphy at Queens got rid of a whole department; there were people tenured he couldn't get rid of.

Irwin: Yes, he did. Right.

Lilia: A lot of injustices were committed under that tenure quota.

Irwin: Well, actually lost very few tenured faculty outside the departments. As was the Education Department at Queens, and it was the Student Services

Lilia: Also counseling, yeah.

Irwin: Yes, I think it may have been part of that, but – or maybe counseling was separate. And at City College it was the Counseling Department. So whole departments were eliminated. But other than that, tenured faculty were not fired. But non-tenured faculty, of which we had enormous numbers, many of those were, because that was the group that was vulnerable.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And many of those were women, because they were hired later.

Lilia: Disproportionate number, yes.

Irwin: Yeah. Okay, so the class action goes on, and it took a good many years to gather this material, because –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: You mentioned that the Gittell committee was 1973, approximately.

Lilia: '73/'74.

Irwin: And the final settlement of this case is 1983. So there's a long period here when you were gathering information.

Lilia: Well, gathering information and also having legal skirmishes with the university. It was in the university's interest to drag it out as long as possible. Who knows what might happen over the long run? We might run out of money, our suit might collapse, but – they dragged it out.

Irwin: Yeah, did you have legal representation during this period?

Lilia: Oh, yeah. Judy Vladeck.

Lilia: I went to her very early. Once we were deciding – once we had decided to go to court, I immediately went to Judy Vladeck and asked her if she would represent us. And she said, "But you know I'm older. Wouldn't you want somebody younger, more feminist to represent you?" And I said, "No, [you know] the university, wonderful lawyer, I trust you." And she said, "Do you know what's involved in this?" I didn't have a clue of what was involved. And I said, "Yes, I do." And that was it.

Irwin: Okay. Did she represent you –?

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: pro bono in the beginning?

Lilia: Throughout.

Irwin: Throughout.

Lilia: But the money, the amount of money that we ever gave her was pathetic. CUNY faculty is on the whole very cheap. They do not readily open their wallets. And our agreement was that if we lost she would count on the generosity of the women. Luckily we didn't lose.

Irwin: Right. Now at some point –

Lilia: So the university –

Irwin: But at some point, I guess near the end, the PSC came into the picture.

Lilia: Yes, it did.

Irwin: And it provided Judy Vladeck with a significant amount of money in payment of her fees. And this must've been –

Lilia: I'm not aware of that.

Irwin: Oh, yes. Yes, that was the case.

Lilia: Okay.

Lilia: I know he paid – I know the PSC paid Mark Killingsworth's salary. Gave him 5,000.

Irwin: Who is Mark Killingsworth?

Lilia: Oh, Mark Killingsworth was our statistician. And we didn't have money to pay him. And so he was complaining, not unreasonably, about that, and we turned to the PSC for help, and we got a loan of \$5,000 to pay Mark Killingsworth. That's the only financial aid I'm aware of.

Irwin: Okay. Well, in addition I believe that the PSC did provide money directly to Judy Vladeck. This was at the very end of the period, maybe 1981/82, sometime in there.

Lilia: That may very well be. I can't comment.

Irwin: Okay, so the case finally comes to a settlement.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: It was a settlement, not a court decision.

Lilia: There was – we did win one cause of action, which was salary. Judge Gagliardi, who was in the Southern District Federal Court, found that CUNY had intentionally discriminated against women in the matter of salary. Now, when he said intentionally, it was that they were aware – my understanding is that the meaning of this, some of the meaning of this is, not that every person deliberately did this, but that once it was brought to their attention, as it had been by the Gittell report, nothing changed. It continued. So the university was aware that there was a problem. So he found for us.

Now, the university wanted to hear – there were 13 causes of action. The university wanted to hear one cause of action at a time and have a settlement. And Judge Gagliardi said no, we're going to hear the whole case. Which put pressure on them to settle. Now, once we had won, the women had won salary, it meant we were going to win automatically other causes of action, because that discrepancy in salary had to come from somewhere. And where it could come from would be initial appointment, salary at appointment, rank of appointment, and promotion. So we were going to win those.

Irwin: And those were other causes of action.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: So the university decided to settle.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: 1983. And the impact on women, from my point of view, was twofold. One was the concrete, as many women received money to make up for losses that they had suffered during the years of discrimination, and those were paid out by CUNY at a later date. But it also, I think,

changed the atmosphere in the university. And I wonder what your feeling was about the impact of the Melani decision, or settlement.

Lilia: Well, it did not transform the entire power structure of the university, as I had naively believed it would. Things like that are not so easily done. But it was a powerful effect. Immediately many women who had been aggrieved, who had been treated badly, who had not been promoted, were promoted. It was a big influx of women moving from the associate professor level to the professor level. And for those women, that was an enormous change, and long overdue. Every woman in the university who was fulltime, who had been here since 1972, got a certain amount of money. She didn't have to make any claims, she just got it as a woman; it was an across-the-board thing. So women got that money, many of whom had not been discriminated against, but this was just – all women got this. In addition to which procedures were set up for pay equalization where women could have individual cases heard, and individual cases for retaliation, so that – many individual women.

They were a little more careful. Men were a little more careful in what they put in writing. Not necessarily in their views. That's harder to change. But what they would say and how they would act, they were a little more careful. And the university hired a few more women; it hired, after all, the first woman vice-chancellor. But it was a woman who was meant to fight in court against us, so that the university would not be pitting a male against all these women, that they pitted a woman – but nonetheless, we got the first – there was not a woman at the vice-chancellor or the university dean's level when we started. Now there are many.

Irwin: And of course the chancellor became a woman –

Lilia: And even the chancellor, yes.

Irwin: In the next decade, in the 1990s.

Lilia: Yes, Ann Reynolds.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: Yes. So those were the things we did accomplish. And chairpersons are not all now 80 percent male. I mean chairmanships are not held any longer by males who constitute 80 percent of the whole, which is what they did in the past. So we did effect many changes. There are more women in administrative positions, and more willingness or awareness of the need to hire women in areas that were regarded as male, like math or the sciences.

Irwin: So the impact of this settlement was profound over-

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: quite a long period of time, and much greater than simply the payments to –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: To individual women.

Lilia: Yes. And also, departments had had to compile statistics for their department. Men and women [had answered] questions. So it raised an awareness of this issue in many people that were then in positions of authority within the department and the college. So that awareness made them more careful. The discrimination continued, certainly, but they were more careful about it. Nobody was going to write – very few people would be willing to write things like "She is delectable" or "Her skirts are too short". Which, I mean, I – and one woman's breasts were commented on in her teacher evaluation or observation. They don't do that anymore.

Irwin: The union took on grievances based on gender discrimination – I guess they had done it before the settlement, but it's my impression from being a union officer in that period, that the number of grievances increased as women realized that the settlement highlighted the fact they there had been discrimination and might be continuing discrimination. And so there were more grievances in this area than there had been before. Is that your impression?

Lilia: I wasn't active in the union anymore, but it would not surprise me. Now, during the class action suit, women had to choose. They couldn't have, as they say in legal parlance, two bites of the apple. You either went the union route or the class action suit. And they were better off with the class action, for the most part. Now, I did, when I was a union grievance counselor, represent many women. I represented Renate Bridenthal, in fact, for her promotion. And Sarah Pomeroy, who could not get promoted at Hunter, even though her book on – she was in Classics – was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. Nobody else in her department had that distinction. In fact, very few other people in the college. And still they didn't promote her. And I still remember – and this is also surprising -- a lot of discrimination against women at Hunter.

Irwin: What is the approximate time period of these?

Lilia: The early seventies.

Irwin: Early seventies, when you were active as a grievance counselor.

Lilia: Yes, yes. And then there was the woman in Asian [Studies] – whatever it was called at Hunter. There was a woman who had a PhD, a lecturer, and she published. The male lecturers did not have PhDs, they did not publish; they got appointed as assistant professors. And when we grieved, and they had to provide a reason, they said she was overqualified.

Irwin: Well, it's interesting you mention Hunter because Hunter had been an all-women school –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: until, I believe, 1960 or so, about that, maybe even a little later. And had a larger proportion of women on the faculty –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: than did other colleges. When I came to City College in 1961, the History Department had one woman.

Lilia: [Joan] Kelly [Gadol].<sup>2</sup>

Irwin: No, she had come –

Lilia: Oh, she came later?

Irwin: She came about that time, yeah. About that time. But they had a woman named Helene Wieruszowski who had been –

Lilia: Oh, I don't know her.

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<sup>2</sup> *Interviewer's note:* She later divorced and used the name Joan Kelly.

Irwin: Who had been – come from Europe and was a distinguished person, - chased out by the Nazis. And she was the only female.

Lilia: Only woman.

Irwin: And then Joan Kelly came in the early – in 1960s.

Lilia: Well, I remember that your department had the distinction of an arbitrator writing, “This department is a cesspool.”

Irwin: Yes. It did.

Lilia: And there were many, many cesspools. It is not – academe is not the ivory tower that people think it is.

Irwin: Well, I think I would agree with that. Over my career, seeing what I’ve seen.

Lilia: Yes. Yes. I’m sorry, I took us afield a little bit.

Irwin: Not too far.

Lilia: But these were the injustices that drove us. It’s why we unionized; why we brought a class action suit. These things had to be fought. Once you were aware of them, you could not just say, “Oh, that’s the way things are,” and retreat into your fear. And that’s how things like this continue, or can even predominate, is because so many people allow it to happen. It was very hard to get people to stand up. I found it difficult to get my colleagues to sign petitions, for instance. Oh, I can’t sign something. I don’t agree with this comma. Yes. It’s –

Irwin: Well, there is a big fear factor. We do have peer judgment as a basis of our system in higher education, and if you alienate your colleagues then they may very well retaliate against you by not giving you promotion or tenure, or other kinds of preferments, which people outside the university don’t realize, such as research grants and access to teaching the courses you’d want, and other kinds of less tangible things.

Lilia: They give you bad schedules.

Irwin: Yes.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And that kind of thing.

Lilia: Scatter you over the campus, where you’re scurrying from room to room, building to building.

Irwin: To weigh you down with that kind of thing.

Lilia: Yes. They can do all sorts of things.

Irwin: So people are frightened even if they have tenure.

Lilia: I think these were frightened people to begin with, who probably didn’t need tenure to be protected.

Irwin: Well, that’s an interesting – interesting point of view.

Lilia: Now, I do not mean by that to say that tenure should be done away with. I'm just saying that many of them will never say anything or do much that will cause them to be in any danger.

Irwin: Well, I must say I agree that the colleagues I saw, those who were courageous, were courageous before they had tenure and after.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And those who were not, it didn't make any difference.

Lilia: Right.

Irwin: And I even know full professors who would reach the top of their career and were just as unable to take a stand on issues as when they were junior faculty.

Lilia: Yes. I agree.

Irwin: So it's a matter of character in that case. Okay. After the settlement – oh, you had already left the union as an activist in –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: 1976?

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: You did not continue in the union. What did you do in terms of faculty activity after 1976? I mean, you were working –

Lilia: I was –

Irwin: on the Melani case all this – until '83 –

Lilia: Well, no, there was much work afterwards. In fact, the last case wasn't settled until maybe ten years ago.

Irwin: Oh. And you were still involved with it?

Lilia: I was still involved. What I was – I was the Director of Freshman English at Brooklyn College, which took up a lot of time. And then, in my last years, I was co-director with Liz [Weiss] of the Writing Across the Curriculum. So those were my activities.

Irwin: and –

Lilia: And I had outside feminist activities. I was active in New York Radical Feminists and the East End Women's Alliance.

Irwin: Now you're back at Brooklyn College. As we mentioned before, after the 1976 election there was no opposition in the union till 1990. The New Caucus appears at that point; they won their first election in 1990 at LaGuardia Community College, and then went on and won –

Lilia: Not surprising.

Irwin: They won – although they did not do as well in the community colleges as they did in the senior colleges. They then won a series of elections at the senior colleges, including Queens, Brooklyn and City, my college, so that they were well positioned by 1997. Steve London

from your college ran against Irwin Polishook, and lost very badly. And then in 2000 Irwin had retired and Barbara Bowen from Queens College ran against Richard Boris. It was essentially an open seat because Richard Boris was not well-known.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: And they won.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: So my question is: how did you regard the New Caucus and this whole development through the 1990s? Did it bring back any remnants of the days when you were active, or was it just something outside of your experience?

Lilia: No. I thought that Richard Boris was a bad choice. And I had grown over the years to respect Irwin Polishook. While he was not militant or radical, I think he did his best, and he was concerned with the rights and welfare of the bargaining unit. I kind of admired him for his penny pinching. He wanted to save the union money – I remember he would park his car over by the river, because the garages there were cheaper, and he would walk to the PSC. So I was willing to support him. The New Caucus is Marxist and to the left of that. I have never been a Marxist. I'm not an ideologue. I don't – I don't know how to say this. I'm not a systematic thinker. I tend to act, react, individually on certain moral principles as opposed to a political dogma. So I've never much cared for Marxism in literature. Or history – as an approach. But I think it's a valid discipline, it's just I would support Irwin. And also, I supported Susan Praeger, who was the Vice-president for Part-time Personnel whom I admired deeply. So it was –

Irwin: turning to Brooklyn College, with which you're familiar, that was one of the campuses, which did switch over to the New Caucus at the chapter level. Do you remember that election? And what –

Lilia: Actually, I don't.

Irwin: led to –

Lilia: No. I'm sorry.

Irwin: Okay.

Lilia: I wasn't involved then. This was all sort of very distant to me.

Irwin: It was the mid-1990s.

Lilia: And I was

Irwin: Ninety-five or so, I don't remember the exact date that Brooklyn College [held that election].

Lilia: And I was – I was really fighting to keep, struggling to keep the class action suit going. So that was – that and my teaching, and being the Director of Freshman Comp [composition] were absorbing all my energy. This was all very tangential.

Irwin: Joan Greenbaum, who I interviewed recently, mentioned in her interview – when I brought up the Melani case, that she knew about it, but at LaGuardia Community College they were not acting in accordance with the principles of equity for women. And this was 1986. And she said that she had to get the union to intervene through a grievance, because the principles of the Melani case were not being honored. Now, was that true in your experience in a larger

Lilia: No.

Irwin: framework?

Lilia: No, I was unaware of that. And I don't know what she means by that. I'd have to get the specifics to see whether it – procedures were set up under the consent decree, but they lasted three years. Now, if the issues she's talking about did not come under the procedures for the consent decree, then –

Irwin: Well, she won a grievance. She went to Arnold Cantor, as she describes it, and told him what the circumstances were, and he said this falls directly under the Melani case, and she eventually was [made whole].

Lilia: I don't know whether she used a procedure under that. I mean, I don't know the circumstances. It's hard to comment

Irwin: You'd have to look at her –

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: details there. Okay, so I think –

Lilia: But I do know that many women came to Judy Vladeck, and a number of her staff interviewed women, and talked to them, and represented them. So I can't talk about her individual case.

Irwin: So it was not a self-enforcing settlement. In other words, the university did not just jump on board and say, well, we are going to make sure that this settlement is enforced throughout the university.

Lilia: I don't know that I can say that. They set up procedures – there was a staff working, set up, there were forms to fill out, procedures set forward, where you presented your grievance and it was reviewed. You presented your evidence, you made your charges, you presented your evidence, and it was – all those cases, all the women who came forward, their cases were reviewed.

Irwin: By the university.

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: Okay.

Lilia: There was a staff that worked just on Melani complaints, Melani procedures.

Irwin: And did they honor most of the complaints?

Lilia: I have no idea.

Irwin: Some, I think, filtered over into the union.

Lilia: They may very well have.

Irwin: As Joan indicated. Okay. Is there anything you'd like to add about your career, about your union work, about the Melani case?

Lilia: I learned a great – what I would say about my union career is that it prepared me to be a more effective feminist. And I saw the world differently as a result of my participation in the union. I saw that you can't look the other way; that you can't just tend your own corner of the garden, as Voltaire would have it. You have to fight for the right. I'm forgetting the name of the German pastor. Niemöller?

Irwin: Yes, Niemöller.

Lillia: Who said all the –

Irwin: Who made that famous – ?

Lilia: Yes.

Irwin: aphorism.

Lilia: Yes. And I see that that

Irwin: Which is absolutely correct.

Lilia: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Irwin: For those who don't know it, you might want to say it on the interview.

Lilia: Oh, I will probably botch it. I'm bad at – “All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.”<sup>3</sup> That is – and the fear – and vis-à-vis the fear that many people have of taking a stand, of being counted, I quote Thoreau: “A man sits as many risks as he runs.” And I quote that all the time, and almost nobody understands it. I have to explain it.

Irwin: Right.

Lilia: But anyway. And the other thing I would say is that in the course of my union activity I met many admirable people, some of whom became good friends. And it may – at the same time that I was seeing the negative side of humanity, its venality, its cruelty, its selfishness in many of the actions that were taken and became grievances, I was also seeing people who were good, who were kind, who stood up for other people, took risks for other people. So it was – it was very enlarging, is all I can say. And I understood politics better as a result of my union experience.

Irwin: Good. Well, thank you, Lilia. It's been a pleasure to talk with you about a history that we share, and to have your thoughts about it. Thank you very much.

Lilia: Thank you.

[End of recorded material at 75:34]

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<sup>3</sup> *Lilia Melani's note*: I incorrectly attributed the quote, “All that is necessary...” to Pastor Martin Niemöller. I had conflated that statement with Niemöller's: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

