

Interviewee: Margot Iris Soven, PhD

Interviewer/Abstractor: Rebecca Goldman

Date: March 25, 2015 (Session 3 of 3)

Location: Margot's office, Olney Hall, La Salle University

Running Time: 44:41

- 00:00 Introductions of interviewer and interviewee, including permission to record.
- 00:14 Margot talks about her husband, Paul. He recently retired from the Physics Department at Penn [University of Pennsylvania], but maintains his ties there and is active in their seminar program. His current hobbies are woodworking and reading. Margot and her husband enjoy traveling and biking. They have visited England several times, taking courses at Cambridge University in the summer. They also traveled to Israel and took courses at Hebrew University. Other countries visited include Japan, Morocco, Turkey, Italy, France, Spain, and Holland. When their children were younger, the Soven family also traveled extensively in the U.S. They currently have relatives in California, New Mexico, and Texas, and travel to visit them.
- 5:18 Margot talks about her children, grandchildren, and extended family. Her two sons, Joshua and Andrew, are attorneys, and her daughter Ruthie is a social worker. One of her sons initially wanted to be an English professor, but changed his mind; Margot sees parallels between what English professors and attorneys do. She has four grandchildren: Aiden and Genevieve (twins), who live two blocks away, and Charlie and Bryn in Washington, D.C. "We very much enjoy the grandparent role." Margot reflects on what it's like to be a parent and a grandparent, and on her relationships with her children. Her youngest brother, his wife, and their family also live in Philadelphia, and Margot sees them often.
- 11:34 Margot talks more about her children's career paths. Because Margot and her husband are both professors, her children spent a lot of time at universities, especially La Salle, but she doesn't think this influenced their career choices. Margot and her husband tried to encourage their academic interests. "I think we were sort of laid-back parents," but Margot sees generational differences in parenting.
- 13:54 Margot describes her literary interests. She is especially interested in Southern women authors and feels most comfortable teaching American literature and modern British literature. She has researched Willa Cather and attended several conferences on her. Other American women authors mentioned include Edith Wharton, Anne Tyler, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. In British literature, she likes the Bloomsbury Group, including Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and E. M. Forster. Margot describes how she chooses literature for her courses based on what she thinks her students will enjoy and respond to. "The hope is that they will want to continue to read, and

they won't find reading a chore." Although she likes William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, she finds them difficult to teach in core courses. Margot and her husband belong to book groups and take summer courses on literature. Other authors mentioned include Michael Cunningham, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jane Austen, A. B. Yehoshua. In nonfiction, she likes biographies, especially Doris Kearns Goodwin. Margot also enjoys Western authors such as Wallace Stegner. "One is always open to adding new authors to one's night table." In graduate school, she read, and enjoyed, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Joseph Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence.

23:08 Margot reflects on her choice to focus on the teaching of writing in her second PhD program and in her career. Although she enjoys thinking about how to teach literature, at the time when she was completing her PhD, she was more interested in the development of reading and writing skills. Other major life events, such as moving to Philadelphia and having children, affected her choice of PhD programs. "If we had remained in New Jersey, and if it had been easy, logistically, to complete a degree in literature, I probably would have." At the time, she was working on a dissertation on Theodore Dreiser.

25:50 Margot reflects on the major accomplishments of her career. She is especially proud of her books on the teaching of writing. "At the time, there wasn't a whole lot out there" on writing across the curriculum. [There is a loud noise on the recording as Margot opens a bag of cough drops and unwraps one.] At La Salle, she received a service award for her faculty development work. "I have to share the credit with the times." She was hired at La Salle and began her research at an opportune time.

29:10 Margot discusses her community involvement prior to her return to teaching, and its effect on her professional life. She was active in the League of Women Voters and the Home and School Association. "Many women in my age bracket say that it was very natural, once we went back into professional life, to become organizers, to get people involved in things that required group interaction." Margot, like many women professors of the time, became involved in faculty development work, "or in administration, eventually, once there wasn't the bias against women."

30:39 Margot discusses changes in higher education at La Salle and in general. The academic job market is more difficult than ever, and universities are increasingly using adjunct professors. "The humanities have always been oversubscribed, in terms of people who would like to teach, but it's worse now than it ever was, in terms of the market." She attributes changes in higher education to the changing student body, the cost of technology, and undergraduates' increasing preference for professional degrees over humanities degrees. "Students' concern about their economic futures is much greater than it used to be." She mentions a recent presentation by William Sullivan, formerly of La Salle's philosophy department, on changes in higher education. "People still think that it's really important for students to have a very broad education, such as what we try to provide here at

La Salle. But on the other hand, there's a lot of pressure on students to be very concerned about their first job. Which is something that my generation certainly never worried about." She also mentions the effects of the economy and a more diverse student body with more non-traditional students. She compares universities in the U.S. and in Canada, where her nieces and nephews attended college. If these general changes in higher education have not affected La Salle as much, she credits La Salle's Catholic heritage.

40:34 Margot discusses career satisfaction and work-life balance, which she thinks is becoming more difficult to achieve. She cites a recent paper by Dr. Sullivan on the subject. She talks about the challenges her son faces trying to balance work life and family life, and shares her thoughts about the current generation of students. "I have confidence in young people...that has not changed. I have always found students at La Salle to be pretty nice people."

44:30 Rebecca thanks Margot for participating in the interview. The recording ends at 44:41.