

Name of Interviewee: Christina Mayer

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Additional Materials: TV34 interview,

Interviewer: Donald DeLeon and Anna Ruane (Montclair State Students), Jane Eliasof

Date: 04/21/2018

Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.

Introduction:

Christina “Christie” Mayer’s parents, Carl and Annemarie, met on the ship as they emigrated from different towns in Germany in 1924. They were each sponsored and therefore did not go through Ellis Island. Her mother was sponsored by a wealthy family from Glen Ridge and her father to a pharmaceutical-related company. They married in 1930 and moved to Montclair in 1940 where they built their home across from the Northeast School. She notes that the family downplayed their German roots, being less likely to speak their native German, during World War II,

Christie has two older siblings and shares the details of discovering the adoptive history for her older brother. She recalls how her responsibilities changed when her father passed away, when she was 15 years old, and how her now husband, Kevin Cooney, has been a part of her life since she was 16 years old.

Christie recounts her memories of some of the major national and world events as she grew up including the civil rights movement, Kent State killings, and Vietnam War.

She has been involved at the Montclair Historical Society, now Montclair History Center, which led to a time spent on Montclair Township’s Historic Preservation Commission. She is a long-time member of the Victorian Society. Christie has long had a love of Montclair’s older homes, the diversity of architectural styles, and the diversity of Montclair’s residents.

Timestamps:

[0:00]: Christina Mayer was born in Mountainside Hospital, which straddles the Montclair/Glen Ridge border, so her birth was actually recorded in Glen Ridge, although her family resided in Montclair.

Her parents, Carl and Annemarie, met on the ship as they emigrated from different towns in Germany in 1924. They married in 1930. They lived in Bloomfield for 10 years following their 1930 marriage. In 1940 they built a home on Windermere Road [5 Windermere Road] across from the Northeast School. Her mom lived there until 1987.

She provides additional details about her parents move to the United States in 1924, post-World War I. They were both 21 when they left Germany and the cost of living was very high in Germany and other conditions were difficult. Although she didn’t speak German at home, Christie’s older brother and sister understood the German that her parents spoke at home, but as World War II occurred, speaking German was discouraged in general.

[2:15]: Both parents were sponsored to come to the United States and therefore did not go through Ellis Island. Her mother was sponsored by a wealthy family in Glen Ridge to work as a companion. Her father was sponsored by a liquor/drug company, McKesson & Robbins, where he worked until the 1950s and then worked elsewhere. (Apparently drugs/liquor was a common combo for pharmaceuticals of that era, like Merck and Squibb, too.)

[3:09]: She attended Northeast School on Grove Street for kindergarten. After St. Cassian's Church in Upper Montclair built an elementary school, she went there from first to eighth grade. She went to Immaculate Conception High School.

[3:50]: She is a member of the Victorian Society Northern New Jersey chapter. It started over forty years ago and offers monthly programs from basically anything in the Victorian Era up to the end of World War I. They also go on trips. She thinks it's fun!

[4:50]: She lives on Watchung Avenue, technically in Upper Montclair, but she does not differentiate!

[5:20]: When asked about childhood memories, Christie refers to another woman coincidentally being interviewed at the same time elsewhere in the room: Linda Monaco (one of three sisters), who had been her best friend growing up and lived two doors away from her. Also, their parents were good friends. Linda went to public school, while Christie went to private school. When Christie attended St. Cassian's she met more people. She remembers up to sixty students *per class* at her grammar school! She remembers the desks being lined up in long, tight rows. Also, one year, to alleviate overcrowding, they introduced an alternate schedule, and Christie attended from 12 - 5 pm, and they even used the stage in the auditorium as a classroom.

[6:38]: She and Linda would go to each other's houses for fun. Christie's house had the pets; Linda had better games and dolls. She felt like a part of the large Monaco family and was invited to all their family events. Isabel and Nick Monaco were Linda's parents and Linda's siblings were Marilyn and Joan. They also went trick and treating together on Halloween. Their dads used to walk behind them.

[7:55]: During summers, there used to be something called "Playground," which may now be part of Parks and Recreation today. She used to go to the "Playground" program at Northeast School. Children could just show up without registering, and there were organized games, crafts, and activities. It was all free and there were counselors that arranged all these activities.

[9:00]: There were not a lot of other kids in the neighborhood, but the families who reside there are part of the Fairway Association. She believes that the land around Northeast School, later developed as housing, had previously been part of a golf course – likely Upper Montclair Golf Club which is now on Route 3 --, hence the term "fairway." The golf course sold off the land. In 1939 or so, her father bought the lot on which they built their center hall colonial home. Her mother had told her that since construction was happening during World War II, they had issues getting materials (i.e., rugs) because of war time rationing. Her brother was born in 1932, her sister was born in 1938, and Christie was born in 1949. Her brother, Carl, left to join the Army a year or two after Christie was born and then lived in Colorado.

[10:40]: She went on to share more details about her oldest brother. When her parents married, they did not have children right away. Her mother's first cousin from Germany had a child with her husband here in the United States in 1930-1932, but that cousin died when the baby was

approximately two years old. The baby's father was going to put the child into an orphanage, but Christie's parents took the baby in and adopted him although it wasn't disclosed to Christie or her sister. Christie suggests that in the 1930s, it was not uncommon to not share information about adoptions, even with the adopted child. Although he is her second cousin, she knew of Carl and thought of him as her brother until her father died, when Christie was about 15 years old, and she and her sister found Carl's original birth certificate identifying his biological parents. Their mother did not want to disclose the information to Carl; Christie and her sister did not share the information with him at that time either. It wasn't until Christie's mother died, in 1998, that Christie asked if he knew he'd been adopted; he said he found out when he was an adult.

[13:50]: She went to Immaculate Conception High School, which was run by the parish. They accepted students from all across North Jersey. The parish would pay for some of the students' tuition. There were still a lot of kids from Montclair, but there would also be many kids coming in by bus or carpooling. It was a different exposure than attending the Montclair public schools would have been; Christie knew some kids from Montclair, but also from a wider area. She graduated high school in 1967. She never felt the impact of the Civil Rights at Immaculate Conception High School the same way it was experienced at Montclair High School, likely because her high school had an overwhelmingly white student population, as had her grammar school. She never thought of it as she grew up in a mostly white school and community. She also noted that at that time, you really didn't see any African Americans north of Watchung Avenue, in Upper Montclair.

[16:15]: When asked about her memories of the Vietnam War, she recalls being at her boyfriend Kevin Cooney's house (now husband), where his family had a small television broadcasting the news during dinner; the news would include the body counts. At her own home, she was never allowed to watch television while eating. She also knew a couple of kids who were killed in action in Vietnam.

[17:10]: Christie recalls the years she and Kevin lived in Jersey City on a 1940's cabin cruiser (1970s) in Newark Bay. They could sometimes hear concerts in nearby Roosevelt Stadium. It was during a Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young concert that the band made an announcement that President Richard Nixon had resigned [August 8, 1974] – resulting in huge cheers from the concert goers. She lived on that boat for seven years before moving back to Montclair, to Aubrey Road [50 Aubrey Road 1977-1984] and later to Watchung Avenue [194 Watchung Avenue], where she resides at the time of the oral history interview.

[18:00]: When asked about other national events she recalled, she notes that she attended Allegheny College for one year, where they kept the television on in the lounge area. She remembers that she was at New York University when students were killed at Kent State University [May 4, 1970] while protesting the Vietnam War. She attended some rallies in support of Kent State students following it. She felt that she did not live in the middle of it. Also, while at NYU, they had a draft lottery. Many of her friends and acquaintances opposed the war and dodged the draft by going to Canada or other means. Low lottery numbers meant you had to go even if you were attending college; her future husband Kevin and his brother had high numbers – in the 300s – and were less likely to be called.

[19:50]: Her parents came over from Germany in 1924. Her mother was a companion, which is a personal assistant for the woman of the household. She worked for the Koch family. John H.

Koch was a wealthy and successful banker in Bloomfield and the mayor of Glen Ridge. The Kochs sponsored Christie's mother to come over, and she lived with them until she got married in 1930. Christie's mother was from Bavaria, Germany. She was born in Munich and grew up in Nuremberg. Her father grew up in the Black Forest region, near Stuttgart. He worked for a pharmaceutical/liquor company. Christie's mother was Catholic, and her father was Lutheran. When they got married, they could not do so in a church. They were going to have to be married in the rectory when Christie's mom's employer Mrs. Koch, known as "Auntie Daisy," stepped in and held the wedding at her house in Glen Ridge. Sometime in the mid 1930's her father converted to Catholicism.

[21:20]: Her mother did not work after marriage. She was a housewife and an active volunteer in the community. She also enjoyed gardening and bowling as a recreation, bowling well into her 80s. When Christie was about 11 years old, her mom did briefly take a job at St. Mary's Hospital in Orange. She used to be head of housekeeping and would take the #76 bus down Grove Street into Orange to work. Christie remembers sometimes having to wait on the front steps for her mother to get home from work in the 1950s, because her mom wouldn't give her a house key!

[23:00]: She moved back to Montclair because as they looked for homes in 1976/77, Montclair homes offered "a lot of house for the money, although the taxes were very high" as opposed to nearby towns with low taxes but small homes – and ability to deduct property taxes at that time was also a plus. They got their first home, on Aubrey Road, for \$49,500. They found their second home on Watchung Avenue during one of their outings to open houses, which they did for fun, because they liked the house so much. They retained the Aubrey Road house as a rental for some time. In the 1980s, they bought some real estate [on Glenridge Avenue] near Grove Street and two multi-family homes. They got a three-story apartment building after it was emptied by the Health Department. They renovated them and still own them today.

[25:50]: She sent her son Karl to public school because she figured that if she was paying for it through taxes she should benefit from it. He graduated from NYU.

[29:00]: Christie was a member of the Montclair Township Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) for approximately five years. She was already a Trustee of the Montclair Historical Society at the time and thought it would be helpful as a liaison between the two bodies. She mentions that it got harder and harder to get things done and was frustrated that people would ignore the HPC's requests and code officials were not actively enforcing applicable codes. She recalls a lot of objections to the HPC's original intent to create multiple local, historic residential districts, although the HPC was successful in designating the Bloomfield Avenue business district and the Pine Street Historic District.

[30:47]: Christie is asked why she feels Montclair's history is important. She notes the English/Dutch origins, the wonderful houses that tell stories, the diversity of house styles, and the diversity of the people in town (Italians, Swedes, Germans, African Americans, Caribbean, etc.) – it's not cookie cutter like other towns.

[33:36]: She retired recently [in 2017].

She recalls that when she was growing up, there were not nearly as many restaurants in Montclair as there are now. She recalls Italian restaurants and delis, but when she was younger, they did not go out to eat. Her maternal aunt, Tante Lore, and maternal grandmother owned a

delicatessen, with the counter foods as well as packaged and canned goods (Christie notes, “it was NOT a deli, it was a delicatessen; there’s a difference!”) on Prospect Street in East Orange; it was considered a “good neighborhood” at that time; they closed it by 1976 as the neighborhood became unsafe.

[36:40]: She was asked about businesses her family frequented in Montclair. She would go to Bloomfield Center to shop, because her parent had previously lived in Bloomfield and were familiar with the stores. They also went to Five Corners in Newark, which was where “all the department stores were” located. She also went “uptown” to Upper Montclair, like school kids do to this day. She recalls, “On Wednesday afternoon, all the businesses were closed...the hardware store, this store, that store.... Turns out, a lot of the guys [storeowners] went golfing.”

[38:00]: She would go to movies at the various theaters in Montclair, including the Bellevue Theater, the Clairidge Theater, the Wellmont Theater. They would also go out for ice cream and her parents liked to get coffee and pie from places like Willie’s Diner at Bloomfield Center. Her father died when Christie was 15 years old, and by that time her sister had a family and lived in Michigan and her brother also had a family and lived in Colorado, so she lived at home with just her mom. She remembers brewing coffee for her mom in the Sunbeam electric percolator every morning before Christie went to school. Even as young teen, Christie was expected to take a bigger role in the family, which was hard at that young age.

[39:40]: Once she got her learner’s driving permit, she would take her mother shopping. She took over all her father’s old chores and errands, i.e, putting up the awnings, cleaning the gutters, shoveling snow, etc. She considers it fortunate that she met her future husband, Kevin, when she was 16 and he was a big help.

[40:46]: When asked what makes Montclair special: She feels like that the architecture and diversity are what make Montclair great. She also notes the creative professions of many of Montclair’s residents – writers, etc. It has history with a lot of continuous organizations – Montclair Operetta Club, Montclair Bird Club. There are over 40 congregations of churches in a town of approximately 38,000 people, which seems like a lot!

Her mother distinguished her 1940-built home from the big, older homes in Montclair, and she referred to those older homes as “big, white elephants” because of the high costs to maintain them. But Christie loves those older homes. She recalls specifically her friend Patty Holiday’s house, “a big old drafty Victorian,” with a dirt basement floor and a coal furnace.

[43:00]: She got her job as a field consultant engineer, from which she had recently retired, while working remotely from her home on Aubrey Road. This was atypical at the time, as people did not expect you to be home during the day if you had a job; she notes working from home is much more commonplace now. She got a company car and would drive to different appointments in Central and Northern New Jersey as well as New York City.

She “has seen big changes in town” but acknowledges it’s not unique to Montclair. For example, most people have 2-3 cars now. When she was little, children could play in the middle of the street, and there were few cars passing by. In the summer, most people either went to the Jersey Shore or Cape Cod (mom, kids and mother’s helpers), with the fathers traveling there every weekend. She notes, “There was nobody in town in the summer.”