Eleanor Huzar

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Jeff Charnley,
interviewer

Charnley: Today is the 28th of June, 2001. I'm Jeff Charnley, interviewing Dr. Eleanor Huzar for the Michigan State University Oral History Project. This is for the sesquicentennial, to be commemorated in the year 2005, coming up.

Professor Huzar, you see that we have a tape recorder here. Do you give us permission to tape this session?

Huzar: Yes.

Charnley: I'd like to start with something about your personal educational background. Where were you born and raised, and where did you go to school before college?

Huzar: I was born and reared in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I went to St. Mark's School and Durham [phonetic] Hall, which was an academy of St. Catherine's College, before going to the University of Minnesota, 1939-43. Then I went to Cornell University, took an M.A. in 1945, and a Ph.D. in 1948.

Charnley: Were those all in history?

Huzar: Yes.

Charnley: Why did you choose history as a career?

Huzar: I simply enjoyed it. I was going to be a doctor, as my whole family were doctors, but I had no talent at all, and I had very much relished my Latin and my ancient history in high school, so I turned back to it and stuck with it.

Charnley: Did you have a history teacher that was a great influence on you?

Huzar: Yes.

Charnley: Who was that?

Huzar: It was Sister Mona Reilly [phonetic], who taught at Durham Hall in St. Catherine's College. She took her degree under B_____ at Chicago, and was exciting.

Charnley: What field of history were you interested in?

Huzar: Ancient.

Charnley: What was your dissertation on, or your main research?

Huzar: The dissertation for the Ph.D. was the relations between the Roman Republic and Egypt, from 273 to 31 B.C., when Rome took over Egypt.

Charnley: Where did you do your research for the dissertation?

Huzar: At Cornell, basically. These were warriors and you didn't go researching that, so I was at Cornell.

Charnley: It's probably especially in Egypt or in Italy, that's for sure.

Huzar: I've done it subsequently, but not then.

Charnley: What was your main conclusion of your thesis or your dissertation? Is there any single thing you can point to?

Huzar: No single thing. It was about the emergence of Rome as an international power, based on the military and economic forces, but particularly military, and the gradual disintegration of the pharaonic rule which had been established by Alexander the Great in Egypt. So the Ptolemys lasted until the last one died with Cleopatra.

Charnley: Did you come up with the topic, or was that suggested by your advisor? Do you remember that?

Huzar: I can't remember. Probably it was suggested, but I can't remember.

Charnley: How was it that you came to Michigan State?

Huzar: I was teaching at that time, Carlton College in Minnesota, and received an inquiry, was I interested in coming to Michigan State. So I said, indeed I was.

Charnley: Had you had contacts with anybody here?

Huzar: Harry Brown was at Cornell when I was there, and I expect that he was the influential figure there to introduce me at all.

Charnley: Was he chair at the time?

Huzar: No.

Charnley: So what year did you come here?

Huzar: 1960.

Charnley: Were there any other historians, at the time, teaching here, ancient history?

Huzar: Richard Sullivan had been filling in, but he wanted to do medieval and so Walter Fee said it was time for an ancient, so I was the first full-time ancient.

Charnley: Who were some of your other colleagues when you first arrived? Not that you have to give a laundry list. It was a large department.

Huzar: They were a very able group. Walter Fee, Madison Kuhn [phonetic], John Harrison, Harry Brown, Robert Brown.

Charnley: Was Paul Barg [phonetic] here at that time?

Huzar: Paul Barg was definitely here. I'm glad you reminded me. And Frederick Williams was

here. Alvin Glick, in Canadian history.

Charnley: Were there any other women on the faculty at that time?

Huzar: Oh, and rightly you remind me. Marjorie Guessner [phonetic], and Harold Fields, of course, was here, too. I'm gradually letting these come back in my memory. But Marjorie was the only other woman.

Charnley: What was her field?

Huzar: English history, and legal history. She taught pre-law people in history.

Charnley: I ran into her late into her career, in the library at Michigan. She was doing a lot of genealogical research.

Huzar: Marjorie was a unique individual.

Charnley: Do you remember anything about when you first arrived, your impressions of the campus?

Huzar: Huge. No, everyone was very kind, very warm, friendly, and I had no hesitation at all about settling in picked up promptly to teach the first courses in ancient history. Within a year, I was teaching a graduate group. Walter Fee arranged it so I taught a graduate reading course every quarter, as well as the undergraduate, and the survey at the base. So I was teaching the three levels.

Charnley: What was the teaching load when you first arrived?

Huzar: Nine hours.

Charnley: Did you continue with your scholarship, or did it change at all after you arrived?

Huzar: No. I was into the Roman Republic and Ptolemaic Egypt, particularly, and I had several articles on that in one place or another, and finally, eventually, did a book on Mark Anthony.

Charnley: You mentioned that you did ultimately get there, get to Egypt for research. When was that, that you went?

Huzar: I started in '67, which was my first sabbatical, and each time I had a sabbatical, I spent it primarily in Rome, at the American Academy in Rome, but always with drifting tours to Greece and Turkey, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt and Algeria. Sicily, [unclear].

Charnley: Was there anything about that travel that helped you in your scholarship or understanding the topic?

Huzar: No. It's just seeing what you've always read about, and it's different when you actually see it. Egypt was one of the places that was still startling to me because it was so much simpler than the European pictures that we'd been seeing regularly. The mixed religion and the magnificent antiquities, which, nothing else is comparable.

Charnley: I can imagine, the first time you saw them must have been exciting, after studying it for years. I remember, I had studies the Battle of the Little Bighorn and I always couldn't figure

out, because I had an image of the plains, I couldn't figure out how they couldn't see the Indians. Then once I got there, I saw how it was pitching and rolling and I could see, yes, you could be easily hidden by the hills. That geography and actually being there on the ground.

Huzar: Especially when you want to be hidden.

Charnley: That's true. So you had a balance. In the course that you taught, you taught both introductory courses, the freshmen course, the freshmen survey.

Huzar: The freshmen survey, and I'd do the ancient near East, too. Charlemagne, and perhaps later, twelfth, thirteenth century, depending on who else was teaching. But that was the freshmen survey, and then ancient near East in the fall, Greece in the winter, Rome in the spring. Then the graduate level was one year on Greece, the next year on Rome.

Charnley: And at that time, you mentioned you [unclear] on terms. Did you like the length, or would you have preferred a longer time?

Huzar: I liked that, because it happened to break naturally for me. I left just when the semesters came in, and when you have a two-year break, you have the ancient near East, Greece--where do you stop? My successor stops with Alexander the Great, but then you start with Hellenistic Rome and go on into the Roman realm. It's a much less convenient division than the three-way, but it just happened that that was what was going when I came, and it worked out well.

Charnley: Did you see any changes in students over the course of you career?

Huzar: Oh, yes. What I'm most conscious of is a breakdown in the basic rudimentary familiarity

with, say, the English language. I've filled in twice since I've retired, and the last time, last fall. Good gracious, even the A students were writing dismaying English. One of my pet peeves was that every word which ended in an S ended in an "apostrophe S," which, I'm sure you're aware of in ATL. Athens. Subject, object, whatever, was "apostrophe S." And it wasn't just the poor students. It ran through the student body. When I tell them, "Now, I want you to know ancient history, but you've got to live with your English language all your life, for your jobs, for your letters, for everything," to breed apathy. My sympathies are with ATL.

Charnley: In looking at grammar and some of those things, and my own experience, too--I had Latin, I had two years of Latin, and I had two years of French before college, and I don't think some of the students are getting that, or they're not getting the grounding in their language. They're getting more social or cultural things, like they're eating French bread instead of declining verbs in French.

Huzar: I don't know why, whether they're just not reading much, whether they've not been drilled. I was, as I said, in the Catholic schools, and they drilled us. It would never occur to me to put an "apostrophe S" unless it was a real possessive. So whether it's the drilling, whether it's the lack of reading, and I do think the computers must have some input, but I don't know. I haven't studied it enough, but I was still startled this time. I taught once before without that much awareness, although I was aware of it, but this time it really hit me hard.

Charnley: It's interesting. Did you have many Ph.D. students?

Huzar: Oh, probably fifteen.

Charnley: Any that went on, that are still teaching today, that you have contact?

Huzar: Oh, yes. I keep contact with all of them, mostly when we got to the plays in Stratford and [unclear] Lakes, every summer. In fact, we get them to come, and so we have a reunion.

Charnley: Is there anyone teaching in Michigan, or are they spread all over the country?

Huzar: They're spread all over the country, from Washington, North Carolina, and Texas, and so on and so forth.

Charnley: What was it, in terms of the teaching? What did you like most about teaching?

Huzar: It's hard to say. I simply loved it. I liked talking about the topic. I enjoyed working out the problems. I had generally very responsive classes. Why, I don't know, but it was a give-and-take that was vital, and I just enjoyed it.

Charnley: Was there any favorite technique that you used--lecture, discussion?

Huzar: It was lecture. Classes in the freshmen survey might be 300 to 500. In the 300 level, it was always well over a hundred, you know, up to 150 or 180. And then in the graduate course, it would be ten, twelve, fifteen. So as long as you have a hundred students, you're lecturing. But when it gets to the small, graduate course, then it's give and take, of course.

Charnley: Did you have any particular favorite assignment that you'd give? It's hard. How do you get the students in a 500-enrolled class, how do you get them involved in the subject? Was there any favorite assignment that you gave them?

Huzar: No. It's time you started learning, they'll learn. I was blessed with graduate assistants at that time, and they also helped with the discussion sections and that kind of thing. I hope they did more in getting the students to participate.

Charnley: Did you see over time that students had less knowledge of the ancient world? As time progressed, they had--

Huzar: Oh, yes. Time progressed, yes. I think the grade and high schools are doing less with that kind of a survey of history, so they come in more innocent of all of this.

Charnley: The curriculum, how did that change in history, while you were here?

Huzar: While I was here, I would say, stress to current issues--feminism, black history, that kind of thing--but also an internationalism, which was much bigger. When I came, we were American and European, primarily, which doesn't say there wasn't a Chinese, Japanese historian. Mr. Fee taught Japanese history and we got Mr. [unclear] in Chinese history and so on, but it's intensified enormously. Now you think of Asia, Africa, Latin America as equal and perhaps greater importance than the old European, which has diminished, I think, very regrettably, because we have built a nice European tradition and I don't begrudge the rest of the world. I just don't think we ought to let Europe subside into nothingness. I would say that was the chief changeover that I was aware of.

Charnley: That's similar to what Dean Sullivan said, an outgrowth of that. You mentioned Marjorie Guessner [phonetic]. There were obviously other women in the college. Did you see an increase in the number of women faculty members?

Huzar: Oh, yes. When I came, it was Marjorie always leading me on. She took me to Faculty Women's Association. They would have an occasional meeting or luncheon or something. Maybe fifteen, twenty people at most. It kept growing, but it wasn't just the faculty women. It was happening everywhere. I don't know how many women in history now, but I suspect maybe eight. I'm not sure. I haven't counted.

Charnley: Were you involved in department or college or university committees?

Huzar: Oh, yes.

Charnley: In what ways?

Huzar: I was on the library committee and that went on for years. For reasons that are beyond comprehension, I was on the university economics committee, the business committee. I became chairman of the business committee. Now, why in heaven's name? I don't know anything about this. We dealt with things like dormitories and bills and what was going up and what had to be cut out, and so on.

My most dramatic episode was that we were having a meeting in the [unclear], the Hannah Building, when there were local riots, I think that had to do with the invasions that were going on. As we sat around the big table, in came the students and jumped on the table and danced on the table, and I'm trying to go on with the meeting. [Roger] Wilkinson was there, and Wilkinson came and said, "I think we might disband the meeting." I said, "Well, we'll disband the meeting."

So we disbanded the meeting, but the kids were there to ask me, because I was chairing, and there were newspeople coming in, so I didn't get away as soon as the others did, and when I came out, everything was locked up tight. So I'm roaming around, trying to get out, and then

some student that I had in class came up and said, "I'll get you out." So he led me out of the back door in the basement, and I was very grateful. But I walked around to the front and as I came out, up came the police, rows of them. Suddenly my sympathies were all with the students. It all quieted down in due course, but that was my most memorable episode there.

Charnley: Was that after the Cambodian invasion in 1970?

Huzar: Yes.

Charnley: And they were right on campus. How would you describe the students at that time, their actions?

Huzar: Oh, it was okay. Some of them were kind of silly, but it wasn't dreadful in any sense. They weren't out just to shock or destroy. They were protesting, which they were doing, I thought, quite decently. Locking in old ladies.

Charnley: So you were on that committee for quite a while, if you ended up as chair, several years?

Huzar: Yes, several years, yes. Oh, [unclear] other committees. Also for the college and for the university, particularly the college. I had things that the dean summoned. Talked about the graduate program, talked about reorganization of the dean's office. There were lots of committees.

Charnley: Did you have any dealings with the university presidents or provosts, either directly or indirectly?

Huzar: Oh, I'd say probably no. John Hannah. The first time I came, there was a reception for new faculty and I met him. "How do you do, Dr. Huzar?" I never saw him again, in any professional way, but every time I met him on campus, he'd say, "Good morning, Mrs. Huzar. How are you this morning?" He was fantastic in remembering his faculty, which automatically made you sympathetic. That's John Hannah. But otherwise, I don't think I ever was cheek by jowl with a president or provost. I knew them, perhaps, but I didn't ever--I was of no importance to them.

Charnley: Well, they must have valued your experience because they kept tapping you for that university--the business committee. Roger Wilkinson.

Huzar: That's habit. I was chair of the classical studies program for many years.

Charnley: What other departments were involved in that?

Huzar: Romance and classical languages, as well as the history and ancient art. Paul Droysen [phonetic] was there in archaeology. So we worked to build up classical studies and archaeology, and actually did a certain amount. I'm afraid it's been diminishing, as this sort of field is diminishing.

Charnley: Did you work with Z_____ at all?

Huzar: Oh, yes. I'd known him for a number of years, so we were always friends when he came and we worked harmoniously. But he got into administration, primarily. But that didn't way he wasn't useful to us.

Charnley: At what point did you retire?

Huzar: 1990. So I simply was sixty-eight, time to go.

Charnley: During your career, before you retired, were you involved in local activities at all or any town-and-gown things that you did?

Huzar: Not a lot. I am a Catholic and I would try to do some charity work through the Catholics. I started reading for the blind, oh, maybe in 1970. Whenever it was they set up that program, I started reading. They were advertising on the radio that they needed readers and I thought, "I can do that."

Charnley: Was that through the library or was that on WKAR?

Huzar: WKAR. What they have is a program that, the state gives blind people free radio receivers and nobody else can have them. So they can keep them as long as they're alive and they get this radio station, which used to go from 7 a.m., which was when I was reading, to 10 p.m. But now they start at nine and I think end at nine, or something like that. Seven days a week. Read the newspapers, read the grocery ads, which I do on Tuesdays. Read novels. We read a number of newspapers around the state. It's supposed to reach at least 200 miles all around, and some thousands of people who may have access to this. So I think it's [unclear]. It's a gentle one.

Charnley: I never thought about the need for reading the price of lettuce at Myers' [phonetic], but I guess there is.

Huzar: I'll tell you, without importance to this lecture, that, beware of Farmer Jack. It has come in and it wants to take over. Every other store--we read about eight a morning--every other store is struggling against the fact that Farmer Jack is trying to undercut them and win the patronage.

Charnley: Have you had any contact with any of your listeners, that you're aware of? Or have you remained the anonymous voice, reading?

Huzar: I think I've met one or two that said they heard me reading, but it's not been a close encounter.

Charnley: In your retirement, have you done any traveling?

Huzar: Oh, yes. I like to travel, so I've continued to bum.

Charnley: You've been back to Europe and to Egypt since your early trip?

Huzar: Oh, yes, yes. And more recently, I'm remarried. I lost my first husband and I remarried. We've been to Alaska, Ireland, the Caribbean. So, no complaints.

Charnley: Seen the world. You mentioned that since retirement you taught a couple times. Have there been any other things on campus that you've either done or taken advantage of?

Huzar: I take advantage of the wonderful shows. The Wharton Center [for Performing Arts], but also the student productions, and the other town theater, and music and so on. This is a good place to retire.

Charnley: Any of the cultural activities, the Wharton Center, in particular? In thinking about some of your colleagues, you just mentioned that you hadn't thought about some of them in a while. Were there things that characterized the history department while you were teaching or when you came?

Huzar: When I came, it was primarily a teaching department. It doesn't say people weren't doing research. Somebody like Bob Brown felt passionately about writing, for instance. And Harry Brown was doing very important work on Garfield and other people were doing serious work. [unclear] But primarily, the interest was in teaching and the students, and nobody compromised with the need to meet those classrooms and get participation. And I would say that it was a very good teaching department. So far as I'm aware, I never heard complaints. I just heard laudatory--

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Charnley: This is side two. When the tape ended, we were talking about teaching and the emphasis in the history department, and you mentioned that now there was a shift somewhat to research.

Huzar: I think so, but I honestly am not a good commentator because I've seen more books come out, but how much there's talk about publication and how much there's pressure on publication, I don't honestly know because I'm not in it anymore. So I think that has been intensified, but it's been true across the country in all history departments. It's conforming to what is the situation.

Charnley: Had you had any contacts with former students who talked to you about your courses?

Huzar: Oh, I certainly see students, and sometimes I hear from students. But what are they going to do? Say, "I detested your course. I've come to see you anyway." [Laughter] So I don't know.

Charnley: That's true. Well, it goes with the issue of evaluating teaching, and when you're a teacher for your whole career, you say, well, what are some of the benchmarks that you can use to know that maybe you've succeeded.

Huzar: So I've just kept going, without knowing success or failure.

Charnley: Were there any staff members that you worked with for a long time? Not faculty, but any staff members? One of the goals, our institutional history. Were there any long-time staff members that you worked with?

Huzar: Departmental secretaries are indispensable.

Charnley: Who were some of those when you were--

Huzar: I suppose one whom I keep contact with because she's still alive is Sandy [unclear], whom you knew, no doubt. And before Sandy, we had a couple of other very good ones, whose names have eluded me. Senior memories, moments. I can't remember. But yes, the secretary was--secretaries, plural--but we started with one and amplified. But they were always of prime importance. You knew the people in the dean's office because you had to go in occasionally for something or another, but I wouldn't say I was working closely with anybody else. Richards or Dick Chapin [phonetic] in the library are very devoted, too, and I knew a number of the librarians.

Charnley: You had served on the library committee?

Huzar: Yes.

Charnley: Was Dr. Chapin supportive of ancient history and acquisitions in that area?

Huzar: Oh, yes. Now they're all pretty much gone, you know. They're in storage somewhere out there by the airport, but he built up well. No compromises. Near cost or something.

Charnley: In looking back at your career here, did you anticipate that you'd be here pretty much your entire career, once you came?

Huzar: Once I came, I settled in. No, I was very happy here, from the beginning. I would have been happy elsewhere. I had taught several places, with complete satisfaction. But this seemed optimum.

Charnley: You mentioned the bigness when you first arrived. Did that diminish over time?

Huzar: Oh, yes, I'm sure. I found you didn't have to go out Jolly [phonetic] Road to [unclear] fields. You moved in M_____ Hall and classrooms hither and yond. It wasn't too big. I came out of Minnesota, after all. No, it was manageable always.

Charnley: In looking back at your career here at Michigan State and also with the idea that the sesquicentennial, 150th anniversary, of the University, is coming up, is there anything that maybe sticks out in your mind in terms of the higher-education experience here at Michigan State?

Huzar: I like what Michigan State has stood for, and I thoroughly approve, starting with a need to train the local people, agricultural people. Not just in agriculture, but broaden the horizons. To build this up and incorporate more and more scholarship.

I give great credit to John Hannah. I think he was a man of fantastic vision and modesty. He always said he was a chicken farmer, but he knew how to [unclear] and would build the other areas, and he supported them and they [unclear]. So it seems to me this has been the kind of education that has been so important for the whole United States, and that doesn't say we don't have problems in the States, but it does say that it's reaching out to give to the people as much as they can accept. And that's wonderful. Yes, I applaud it.

Charnley: Interesting. I want to thank you on behalf of the project for your insights, and I appreciate the time that you've spent.

Huzar: I appreciate your asking me, Jeff.

Charnley: Thank you.

[End of interview]

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