

Oral History Interview with Dr. Lillian Falk
Conducted by Angela Baker, June 1,1993
Transcription by Denise Beaubrun

- AB: Okay, well to start off with a little background information about you. Could you state your full name and then your date and place of birth?
- LF: My name is Lillian Falk and that's my full name, Dr. Lillian Falk to make it even more full. My date of birth 1933, my birthday is April the second.
- AB: And where were you born?
- LF: I was born in Poland in Warsaw.
- AB: Oh yes. Could you describe your educational background?
- LF: Well, my mother's in the Greywood, which I came to St. Mary's, is my Ph.D. From Harvard, 1963. And before that of course I had to do my Masters and before that my Undergraduate. My Masters in Linguistics, in general Linguistics, is from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and before that the Bachelors is also from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1954, in English and in Hebrew language as a Minor. English was my Major and Hebrew Language, not Literature, but Language was the minor. (AB in background: okay) These were my degrees.
- AB: Right. How many years have you been associated with St. Mary's?
- LF: Ah, twenty-six years.
- AB: I see, and in what capacity were you first hired?
- LF: I believe that I was first hired as a lecturer, which would be normal even if I had a Ph.D. at that time. And then I was promoted in the usual way to assistant professor and that's my rank at this point.
- AB: Okay, so how have the responsibilities of your position changed at the university over the years?
- LF: Why is there a question about change? I came as a teacher and I served as a teacher, so there were really no changes in that. I always had classrooms I was responsible for and I was responsible for teaching my students, marking their papers, giving them grades at the end of the year and that, that has never changed.
- AB: Any changes in the courses that you ah...
- LF: Oh the courses of course! The titles of courses were different. I, by no means did I teach just one course over the years. There were new courses, there were different courses from year to year, ah, I..., when they were being introduced I sometimes designed by myself, sometimes by the department in general. So, ah, in that sense certainly one does not repeat the same work.

- AB: Yeah, okay. (sound of shuffling in background) So over the years the size of the University has grown a great deal. What effect do you think that's had?
- LF: On the students? It's really difficult for me to say, ah, I don't know how the student feels. It's not the same student who came in '68 to a small university, and the one who comes now to a bigger university, because students who come now still can think of it as a small university as compared to British Columbia or Toronto. So things being relative, it can seem a very big and formidable place to the students then and now, and then again it can seem smaller, or thankfully smaller where we have students who come from another place just because it was too big and they transfer and they find this much more reassuring and they get to know people they get to know their professors which they didn't in their other place. So it's relative, it's small or big depending on where a student comes from and how far away the student is from home and so on.
- AB: How has the sizes of your classes changed and has the number of students that you're responsible for changed?
- LF: Ah, there have been fluctuations. Ah, I do remember that I started, my course was a new one, and I started with a class of seven grade students in 1968, this is very true, but ah, then the structure of classes changed and I have had classes as large as over a hundred in one room. I have had classes typically of thirty-five or forty, in introductory courses and the biggest one I suppose was eighty-five or so in my advanced course and I've had every, every kind in between as well.
- AB: Umm... so you've noticed no general trend over the years?
- LF: Well, ah, I can't say that they keep just growing because if that was the fact I would now have classes off a thousand which is not the case. So they are limited by the spaces in classroom and other factors.
- AB: Do you find that your relationship with your students have changed at all over time?
- LF: I can't say that, as to available to the students or even when the numbers were larger and I would speak to them, and communicate about any problems that I could see about their work, ah, I don't think that has changed.
- AB: Umm... okay how about your fellow staff members. Has there been a change in your department that you'd noticed around the university in terms of gender and age and ethnic origin of your colleagues?
- LF: I wish I understood what lies behind these questions. Ah... (Laugh) (Angela: Nothing no...) You don't see I ah... What has changed? Maybe the growth in the staff. There was always a variety, there were always people, ah, there are only two genders so no more than two. There were always people from a variety of countries by origin, always people of a different mother tongue other than English, as is the case still now. Ah..., there were certainly people born elsewhere, there were quite every variety and sometimes when that question is asked, ah, perhaps what's behind it is a question as a start in a University, a Nova Scotian University, do we have the presentation of Nova Scotians who are not Caucasian, and that would be Mi'kmaq or Maliseet population of Nova Scotia and I think that either these are very few or I have not met them, so these people are still missing. But that is not to say that the ethnic, in other senses, that the ethnic

composition is not very highly varied and pleasantly so, so I have friends from all sorts of places and all kinds of backgrounds.

- AB: That's good. I am not really looking for anything in particular just trying to get any comments you have. (Lillian: yes) Okay, let me see. The school became officially co-educational in 1968 (Lillian: yes) what was that change like?
- LF: Yes that was the second year of my, ah..., teaching year. What was it like? Ah..., it was kind of exciting, it was, I looked forward to it in anticipation, curious what would happen. I was wondering whether I would simply have more women than men or whether there would simply be more men than women and I've never ceased to have wondered because I don't know the statistics, how come there are always half and half. Any classroom that you enter is half-and-half. I know in general population is half-and-half but that does not mean that they register half-and-half. That's how it always is and that was very nice. It was nice to be there when it changed.
- AB: Around the same time the school was becoming secular and the Jesuit fathers were losing control of the University, what type of effect did that have on the school?
- LF: Oh, just made it more similar to other schools that, that don't have a particular religious identity but, ah but, I think inside and within the school the services of the Catholic chaplain were, have always been available, they still are other centers for adult studies and Christian discussion. So I think that for the students who are seeking that or who came because their uncles and grand-fathers have been students at the Catholic University, because they wanted to be a Catholic and remain at a Catholic University, I think the grand-sons and grand-daughters now can still come for the same reason. They can still get that, obtain that, ground if they are looking for it, both among students and with faculty and of course with the Chaplaincy so, well again I wasn't acquainted with the university for many, for a great number of years when it was under the Jesuit, but sufficiently to think that it's still there if you want it. And it's for the general student who is not interested in it, well, still doesn't need to get involved but neither did they when it was a Jesuit school, it was still open to every faith and there was never any pressure for students to participate in particular religious ceremonies, never.
- AB: Okay ah, unionization of faculty employees took place in the mid 70's, did that have any effect on the faculty?
- LF: Well yes it was inevitable. The school was big enough, ah, a school, any institution cannot run itself without clear guidelines as to how business is conducted, how contracts are written. Before that the contracts were negotiated I believe, depending on what went on when they were negotiating their contract. So this is essential, this would be a great anomaly if this University did not have its union. And what effect it might have? Well, as far as that, the effect would be that faculty members assumed, received, some peace of mind, that they can, certain things that were negotiated for the group as a whole, so they didn't have to worry that individually they obtained a bad contract, because the contract was now general. So certainly this was just essential, I can't imagine a University working without one. I sometimes hear of institutions where there is no union, or the institution is not permitting a union, that seems to be a dreadful situation.

AB: Okay, from the time you were here in the '60's, how have the academic programs changed? For instance what types of courses were offered when you first came, what types of courses were required, things like that.

LF: Lucky me! Have with me the calendar for the year in which I came or rather the year just before I came and the uh..., in English we had smaller number of courses, ah the old pages, that's just two and two pages of course because now we have far more and I think now also, I should have counted them before you. Now the English courses run from page 86, last years calendar '90-'93, pages 86, 87, 88, 89, and that's two columns of courses. In '67-'68, it was from page 72 and 73 and then there was only half page, so it's two pages of English courses. The basic ones remained, I think that we could identify the ones that disappeared. Ah, Introduction to Literature we have, Pre-Romantic Romantic, we still have romantic, Victorian, we always, there will always be a Victorian age, Introduction to Modern Poetry, we, we have modern poetry, certainly that is still taught. There is 17th Century, there's Neo-Classicism, sometimes they have a different title, they all, they are all core courses, they still exist. Certainly Middle English with Chausseur, ah there's still a bit of drama, Novel, 19th Century Novel Literary Criticism, there is one that I don't see by it's title anymore and that's called Ultimate Concern with a Modern Novel, we don't have that course under that title, but we still have concerns in Arts courses and 101 has been renumbered 201, it is still an introductory course to Literature. So, ah well the question as to what has changed in courses, so, well, something must explain the greater number of courses right?

So and if we're looking really for something strikingly different or something that was absent then it would be, let me start with myself. I introduced a course on History of the English Language, you see it wasn't there in '67, this was a course which I introduced and it has been on the calendar all those years and I taught it in alternate years and it is actually why I was hired to do that kind of job, the linguistic aspect of English. Another one that wasn't there in the old one are, specific course for English language and grammar and one that is called Modern English Language which was grammar, that piece was mine. Then to go through a sampling of those that weren't there then, Introduction to Folklore was not there then, Writing by Women was not there, the Writer and Nature was not there, it's now Children's Literature, Irish Literature, ah, Creative Writing. So that gives, perhaps doesn't mention all of them, but it gives some mention at least of courses which were not taught in '67, '68, Scottish Literature Edition and Irish Biography and Autobiography. So yes there is a greater variety understandably but also the number of professors in English is greater now and so we have more resources.

AB: How many English professors approximately do you have?

LF: Well there are twenty usually, there are twenty now. Yes ah, just near twenty I think.

AB: How about in '67?

LF: Ah, I don't have a list here at the top so I can't tell you off hand but it would be fewer, say about half that.

AB: Okay, let me see. Okay, lets talk about the, your perceptions about the student population, ah well, of course in the 60's it's changed over and become fifty percent male and fifty percent female, (Lillian: yes). Have you noticed any other changes in terms of the age of your students maybe or...?

LF: Possibly there are more greater numbers of mature students on campus and certainly the facilities have opened up for them in a much better way than they were then. But I've been usually teaching morning courses and that does not attract the mature students, so I just had a few from time to time in my classes together with the others. I think they are a little older now, I asked my students to introduce themselves at the beginning of last introductory course, and I was actually surprised to see such figures as twenty-five year olds, twenty-eight year old, which would not be the case when I came, I think they were younger on the average. That's all I know about the age.

AB: Okay. Have you noticed any shifts as far as ethnic origins of your students are concerned?

LF: Well, I'm missing some. We used to have Chinese students from China and they were certainly not coming in the numbers they used to come, and from the Caribbean, they don't come as they used to come and there must be financial and economic reasons for that. But these students used to be more visible, more present, in school. We do have people from China, from the Peoples Republic, but they are different. They are usually adults, already involved in their professions and there are teachers, actually quite often there are teachers, and they are just very few and they are sponsored by the government, so it's not the kind of much larger groups who, who are supported by their family. I don't see them as much.

AB: Okay, so what do you think students have wished to gain from their educational experience at St. Mary's, do you think that has changed over the years?

LF: I don't think so, ah, they are, certain things are better evaluated I suppose by surveys and statistics, people are asked why they are coming or what they are looking for, ah, but usually it is a way to, are you a profession later on, a professional school or some kind of training. It is a way to the labor markets; it is a preparation for a degree in Education or a degree in the Medical profession or whatever it is. Ah, so because, well I suppose the fact we are Commerce, people come out with degrees, which prepare them for specific work, but when they take commerce they still have to do other things. So it's just if you come straight from high school, this way they are making sure that they're not giving up on their chances, that they're just beginning to explore their, ah, what more they can do in the future. So they come literally (laugh) to get their education and that's what I see. I see them in their first year when they have all those plans and hopes, also usually in the first year so many students say they don't know what they'll major in, they have to look around so it isn't as if they're coming with a complete career plan or written out only. Coming was because they finished High School and they do not want to stop there, they want to make sure they are open to other, to, to the options that can suit them, so they've got to keep standing, and I think that's why they are here.

AB: That's about all the topics I wanted to cover, is there anything you can think you'd like to add?

LF: Ah, well you tell me now again, about the ah, purpose of this project and then maybe I can tell you about something that wasn't covered in the questions.

AB: Okay, well really, see all the statistical material is readily available, so we'll be able to figure out what courses were offered, when, where, the students were coming, all those

types of things. But when you write a history it is kind of a skeleton if you use those kinds of statistics, so if you interview a wide range of people and get their perspectives, not necessarily their right or wrong answers but their perspectives about what was going on over time, and changes they've perceived over time, with that you could really paint a more accurate picture of what was happening.

LF: Well for that I don't suppose that it doesn't seem to lead to any anecdotal experiences I think that what I could add, might be erased from the tapes because it was not relevant, was that it was a very pleasant and friendly place in the 60's and '68, in ways that are perhaps still there but are difficult to maintain it with such a larger number of faculty members, and when the entire faculty was smaller there were annual parties, Christmas and other times for the entire faculty. Ah, with excellent food, very jolly and pleasant atmosphere created by the Jesuits who have very nice social skills, that not everyone has, and that is, is something I think can exist in a school with old traditions and with a relatively small number and I don't think that it can be replicated now with the great number of faculty that we have and that was very nice.

AB: Do you do anything like that just in your department now?

LF: Oh yes, the department gets together of course, but that was for the whole University and that was nice. Ah, there was and active, and still is, Faculty Women's Association and that was opened to a membership of, at that time any women who were on the faculty teachers, any women who were wives of the faculty members and I don't know any other relationship they might have been in and it was ah, a very friendly group that still exists, it has formed some other activities, that there are instructions in watercolor, lessons that these members can participate in, some others going together to art gallery openings here on campus, and going together when the drama society has presentations. So that exists in those times, but it was nice to be received by that group when I arrived.

As for women, I don't really remember a question about that, but when I started teaching it was a men's school exclusively, ah and I, actually when I applied I didn't know if it was alright to apply because I didn't know if they had women faculty members but it turned out that they did so when this was an exclusively male school there were women teachers. Not many know that, so there was absolutely no problem about that as contrasted with some departments at Dalhousie, which although there was no written policy like that, there were heads of departments that absolutely refused to consider a woman's candidacy. The English department at Dalhousie at the time was like that. Ah, so in many ways, under the Jesuit rule at that time it was a very progressive place and very open, so there more than think, think of ah, the Jesuits were very available.

Father Hennessy, as the history of St. Mary's will reveal, at every turn had this office, where it must have moved to one place or the other but eventually it was it was in the office, well, where it is now, it is the last office before entering the connecting corridor to Loyola on the right. Ah, there he was, any student could walk, and did, to talk to him about any problem whatsoever they had. Ah, these were very nice things and when people like myself and I've been invited to a group of people who call themselves the Quarter of a Century, that was mine, a Quarter Century Club. That's ah, people who there that long, and so people started recalling things and that skilled and I don't know whether it Kevin Francis that's in charge of this project. I think that in addition to whatever individual interviews he has planned, he might talk to the Quarter Century Club and come for, send somebody for a group reminiscences (AB: That would be a good

idea) because once we get started people always will remember something. Do you remember such and such, do you remember such and such, what you used to do, do you remember what he used to say in class, or what she used to do in class, and then it all comes out or just individually, it's hard for me to spot the kind of things that may be interesting for the club. So I think these are my memories, such as they are, for the moment.

AB: That's great.