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Interviewee: Sandra Perrin
Interviewer: Dawn Walsh
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Dawn Walsh: Hello, Sandra.

Sandra Perrin: How are you doing, Dawn?

Dawn Walsh: I'm fine, thank you. I'd like to start our interview with asking you some basic background information, such as when and where you were born.

Sandra Perrin: I was born August 3, 1929, in France.

Dawn Walsh: And then did you grow up in France?

Sandra Perrin: Yes, I did my schooling in France. Then, at the age of 17, I went to spend one year in Prague, mainly because my mother's family was there, and because of the political turmoil in Prague, after one year I had to come back to France. At that point, I also had to think of my future and what kind of a skill I was going to develop, and I decided to become a nurse. So I went to nursing school.

Dawn Walsh: And you mentioned the political turmoil at that time. Can you talk about what was happening while you were there?

Sandra Perrin: Oh, yeah. Oh, it was quite simple. The Communists took over, and it practically came out overnight. Because I was a French citizen the French embassy demanded that I go back to France. I figured it was a good thing for me, because it was not very fun to live under a Communist regime.

Dawn Walsh: Now at that time had you started to think or develop your ideas about war and peace?

Sandra Perrin: Oh, no, not at all.

Dawn Walsh: Not at all?

Sandra Perrin: Not at all. I was 17, going on 18, and no—not at all. I was more interested in myself, because I was raised in a peculiar situation, which I was raised in the country in small house surrounded by woods and I did not have much of a social life, which I missed. So when I finally had a chance to be in the city, I enjoyed the city. I was not worried about war. Of course, I had to worry about the Communists since they took over. There was a huge outpouring of

Czech citizens at that time going out of the country, trying to avoid the Communists. When I came back from Prague to Paris the train was literally was full of Czech of citizens trying to make it out of the country. Most of them settled in France or England or they eventually came to the States.

Dawn Walsh: So, again, you weren't too aware of politics of war and peace at that time?

Sandra Perrin: No, not all.

Dawn Walsh: But then you said that you went on to nursing school, and when was the first time that you started becoming politically and socially active? Did it happen at all while you were in school?

Sandra Perrin: Actually, I had to—I am a child of the War. So I had to deal with war and peace, actually I was living it. But it was so much a part of my life that actually that I was not voicing it the way you think. Americans had not been involved in the Second War, and I was. I was eleven when the War came about, and lived it because I was living in a part of France that was not occupied by the Germans—but virtually it was, nonetheless. Because of this political situation in the area I was in, many refugees came to live and many Jews, because they were hiding from the Germans. They did no—those who were aware politically of what the Germans were trying to do as Nazis knew they had to hide, otherwise they would be picked up and sent to concentration camps. So our area was full of Jews, hiding. My parents were one of the rare people who actually were hiding them. If they had been discovered we would have been all killed, and we just avoided this type of situation by three weeks, actually. Because the Germans were supposed to come and...in the meantime, France was liberated, and they didn't have the time. They only had the list of the people who were going to be killed. So yes, I was aware of peace and war, because I was living it.

Dawn Walsh: Right, very much so. So you had people living in your house?

Sandra Perrin: Yes. Uh, huh.

Dawn Walsh: And what types of interactions did you have as a child with the people who were hiding in your house? Did you talk with them and interact with them?

Sandra Perrin: Oh, of course, yeah. The only thing, when the mailman, for instance, came we had to shoo those people to the stable where the cows were, because nobody was supposed to know that we had people in the house. So it was restricted for them, because they couldn't go out. They had to stay in the house. And so were not hiding, actually, but they knew they couldn't go to the city. And we had two couples. They stayed about one year, each one.

Dawn Walsh: At different times?

Sandra Perrin: Uh, huh, yes.

Dawn Walsh: And so do you recall any of the conversations that took place in your house around that time?

Sandra Perrin: Most of the conversation was circling around the Germans. We called them the potato bugs with dirty floors, because Germans came, and they took all your food and they would ship it Germany, with the blessing of the French government. So it was really about surviving. We didn't have food. We had coupons, and we were entitled to 500 grams of sugar per month, so much bread a week with coupons. So I think of at that time people were mostly concerned about survival—how to make a penny, how to pay the bills. As a matter of fact, a person only...in my family the reason my parents survived was because we had a cow that produced milk and produced milk, and then for years she produced milk. And my mother would make butter and sell it on the black market. That's how we survived the War. Actually, and cats, also brought us some rabbits. It was very unusual style of life.

Dawn Walsh: And then how old were you when France was liberated?

Sandra Perrin: I was 16, maybe 15—something like that.

Dawn Walsh: And so, do you remember at that time you were getting close to being a young adult and, perhaps, engaging more in adult conversations□?

Sandra Perrin: Well, I've had adult conversations all my life, because I was living alone in the country with adults. So there was not interaction with kids of my own age, except in school, which was about a mile and a half away.

Dawn Walsh: So once France was liberated was their talk in your neighbored, in your area and village, sort of theoretically about, you know, the War that had happened and just philosophy of war and what could be done change the situation?

Sandra Perrin: Again, we could not even talk too much about philosophy of war, because we were living it. And what happened also is that when the War was over—not over—when France got liberated, there was a big dividing line among the population of our part of France, in particular, between the French people who were collaborators, they were helping the Germans, and those who were helping the Resistance, because there was a resistance among the French people, in spite of German occupation. The Resistance was mostly hiding in the woods, and we had woods. But, you had the French people who actually would go to the Germans and say, "The Resistance is located here. Those are the people who are helping the Resistance." Then you had the French people who were actually against the French government and helping the Resistance to get rid of the Germans. So that, by itself, was a war within a war.

You would have to be very careful what you would say to anybody, because your life was on the line. Like for instance, if... since we did not have food, we didn't have flour so we would put grain that we had not declared to the government—we tried to just set aside something for us to live, which wasn't legal, but my gosh, you had to live. We would put some of the grain in backpacks and go to a person who had an electric mill to turn it into flour. That guy was dangerous for the Germans, because he was actually helping the Resistance, and what he was doing—he was the milling that grain, but it was against the government regulations, so he could have had been sent to a concentration camp. I remember one time, I was there and one of the collaborators, because we knew them, and he was there while the guy was grinding the wheat. He just looked in the bin to find out what kind of grain it was, and it was a nervous moment, because we didn't know what he was going to do with us.

Dawn Walsh: But nothing happened?

Sandra Perrin: No. But he mysteriously also had a bicycle accident and died. He was just too dangerous for the community. You had this type. So real, actually, that you don't even want to talk about to other people, because people living in the country are very suspicious. They know that silence is like it's gold.

Dawn Walsh: Well, thank you for talking about that.

Sandra Perrin: I know that you want to talk about the War in Vietnam—is that your main concern?

Dawn Walsh: That is a focus, but all the background and history is important as well.

Sandra Perrin: I think that out of the War and the Resistance I had developed from a young age, social justice—that everybody should be equal, Jews or not Jews. Nobody should be persecuted. That's what I developed as a young kid. In other words, not accept racism; that was my major development when I was a kid. I just refused to be a racist.

Dawn Walsh: And so, do you remember a certain encounter where you were able to put that view into action?

Sandra Perrin: Well

Dawn Walsh: As a young person, say with other classmates or just other people that you knew?

Sandra Perrin: Well, I didn't have classmates. I just went to—I didn't have any encounter with my classmates. I was just with adults still until I was in the twenties. No, it's just something that stays with you and if you have an occasion to voice the fact that racism is wrong and should not exist, then you seize the opportunity to say something. For instance, I'm going...I'm in San Diego...well, my neighbor. She was a go-go girl. So, she was a go-go dancer, and she at one

point, she said she was a racist, and she said that she was not going to serve a Black person in a bar. Because she said, "I reserve myself the right not to serve a Black person," and I said nothing. She was a neighbor. Shortly after, I realized that I was representing racism, because I did not say anything, and that I was probably responsible for the death of Martin Luther King, in the process, because I was not voicing. It was certainly easier to voice my opinion in that particular case than doing it during the Resistance. If I had said something, it would not have been dangerous at all, because I was in the United States in the first place. You are entitled to voice opinions without being killed or put in a concentration camp.

Dawn Walsh: But it sounds like, perhaps, because you had to when you were younger be silent, that is a bit of a transition to go from being silent to speaking out.

Sandra Perrin: That's possible.

Dawn Walsh: You had to sort of get used to that.

Sandra Perrin: Right, I was traveling in the United States. I agree with that, yes.

Dawn Walsh: So what year did you come to America?

Sandra Perrin: I came in 1960.

Dawn Walsh: And so...and then what time did you come to Missoula, specifically?

Sandra Perrin: 1972.

Dawn Walsh: I want to go back just for a minute to your comment about Martin Luther King. So you were in America then during some of those Civil Rights activity, and what was your awareness of that situation at the time?

Sandra Perrin: Well, I was living in Chicago working as nurse. And my husband—I was married by then—and he was student at the Northwestern University. One night, on TV, we saw the famous scene when the Blacks were massacred for going across the famous bridge in Selma, and that was an impetus for me to realize that something was definitely very wrong in this country. At that point, the following day my husband with some students from the university actually went to Selma to be part of this movement. But nothing...they didn't get killed, but one of the organizers did. But this was at the beginning of the Civil Rights.

Dawn Walsh: So was there any activity happening in the neighborhood or surrounding area where you were living?

Sandra Perrin: Lots of marches, yes...lots of marches and lots of sit-ins. Yes, that situation of where TV brought the political life to you gave the impetus to be a little more active, because television brought it back, and you could see it even better in your house.

Dawn Walsh: And so, did you personally get involved at time?

Sandra Perrin: No, I stayed home. I was still French then.

Dawn Walsh: But you stayed abreast, as you were saying, through the TV? And your husband was very involved, going down to Alabama?

Sandra Perrin: Oh, yes, very much so. We had lots of conferences, and my husband was one of the organizers. We had lots of Black speakers, because it was a Civil Rights Movement. Yes, we were very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Dawn Walsh: And so, what was your role in the conferences or other events that were happening in your area?

Sandra Perrin: I would help him with the organization of it, like hosting those Black people who were speakers and didn't have any place to sleep. So they would sleep at our house on the floor. Yes, that was my involvement. I was not a full-fledged organizer. My husband did it, some of the students did it, and I was there to be...I was there to help. That's what happened.

Dawn Walsh: What do you remember about the assassination of Martin Luther King and how you responded to that and the people around you?

Sandra Perrin: Well, it was a shock. I think it was as bad as when Kennedy died. Yes, it was just like, this type of action was just not to be tolerated—just because people want to be free or equal. And it was all I would say. Of course, it gave me the impetus to be more active. And in the meantime, I had a son. So when I gave birth to my son, and I have to say motherhood came late to me, but then, at that moment I just realized that he did not ask to come to life, and it was my responsibility to provide a life where we would have more equality and more justice. So I became more involved. But I will not say that I am involved a 100% with my life. I just do what I can. I don't tolerate racism, and I will voice it. I was involved with the War in Vietnam, yes, and that was in San Diego.

Dawn Walsh: And how were you involved, in San Diego?

Sandra Perrin: Well, how I was involved? I was raising a kid, so I would keep myself abreast about the events. Then, I was helping for the organization of it, and it was very involved. Of course, some of it had to be done in secrecy, because it was...everything was...quite a bit of it was done behind the doors. It was a period where [unintelligible] was very important to the United States. He really gave quite a bit of information and force behind the movement against

the War in Vietnam, in San Diego. We had one kid who actually doused himself with gasoline and died in the process.

Dawn Walsh: And did you know this person, personally?

Sandra Perrin: No, he was a student. But we did not know him personally, no. So there were times where people were becoming virulent about the War in Vietnam, and, of course, the government was very much on top of the situation and ready to be violent against the movement for those who were against the War in Vietnam. This is how I became a citizen, because of this. I thought if I had to go in concentration camp, the whole family would be together instead of being separated. That's the only reason [laughs]. See how paranoid I became?

Dawn Walsh: Yeah.

Sandra Perrin: The atmosphere was very different. My husband and some other students also were very involved in educating the young people about what risks there were if they were deciding to go to Vietnam, or if they were drafted, we had demonstrations in front of the draft office. And so, that became violent. But many of those young people come here out high school and decide to go to Vietnam because they didn't know what to do with themselves. But they also did not know that they might

So that was a very good point actually a very important service that some people provided in San Diego at that particular time, and it was dangerous. We had to be very careful. We were...not me, personally, but my husband was followed by the police when he was coming back from the university to La Hoya where we were living. It was about twenty miles out of San Diego. We were monitored all the time. If we took the dog in the hills, we might expect the police to come. They were trying to intimidate us, of course. That was the way that they were using to stop our activities.

Dawn Walsh: Did you know people who did get arrested or more direct encounters with law enforcement?

Sandra Perrin: I think Angela Davis would probably be the one who got good...[laughs]... treatment from the government, because she was very vocal, very active. There was a whole group of students and my husband was one of them, but she was the one who actually went to prison, but for a different—it was because of the Black Panther Movement.

Dawn Walsh: So were you...at all, did you have connections to the Black Panther Movement?

Sandra Perrin: No, I personally, no. But she did. Because it was a Black movement, the Civil Rights didn't give them the rights fast enough, and it was the part of the decree of "Black Power." Of course, out of that, some kind of movement was going to come out. I think the example of Angela Davis is probably the only person that I know of who spent quite a bit of time in prison.

Dawn Walsh: And had you met her, personally?

Sandra Perrin: Yeah, she was a friend, yes. She's out of prison, of course.

Dawn Walsh: Right.

Sandra Perrin: And now, she has something else in mind. She is very involved with the industry of the prison, which is becoming a business to fill up the prisons. And, of course, most of the people in prison...not with rights. This is what she—she works for that now.

Dawn Walsh: So you're still in contact with her, occasionally?

Sandra Perrin: Occasionally. Uh, huh. So, what else did you want to know?

Dawn Walsh: Well, let's move to Missoula and Missoula Women for Peace. I understand that the group, Missoula Women for Peace, started in 1970, and you said you moved to Missoula in '72. At what point did you get involved with Missoula Women for Peace?

Sandra Perrin: Really, because I had friends who were members of the Missoula Women for Peace and, of course, we were involved with the War in Vietnam, and that was a way for me to participate, to join the group. But by then, of course, I think the war was kind of dwindling down thanks to people like the Missoula Women for Peace. So many Americans were realizing that it was a wrong war that finally it had to stop. I really believe that the War in Vietnam stopped earlier because the people did not want the war anymore. It was an unjust war. Probably, the monument in Washington, D.C. is a very good way to show it. We have all those names on that wall.

Dawn Walsh: Have you seen that?

Sandra Perrin: Yes, and it's impossible not to be moved by this wall. Something happens to you when you see all those names. There's always somebody there, copying a name. There are always flowers in front of that wall. There is always somebody crying. And is an amazing memorial. Telling you, "No more. That was mistake."

Dawn Walsh: Yet we continue to engage in wars.

Sandra Perrin: Why do you think we get involved in wars? Why do we not prevent wars? It seems to me, quite often, it is because it's for economic reasons based on the—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

Sandra Perrin: —political power we have, in the States. Of course, I don't know what happens in Africa. We have had wars. It's like we have had killings all the time. And this is one question that I'm playing with, "Why is it that we have had people killing people, without wars, sometimes?"

Dawn Walsh: How so?

Sandra Perrin: Oh, like, for instance, somebody killing somebody else here in the streets of Missoula. Why? Is that something in the human creature or what? But it's not something new. It has been happening and happening for centuries. Why? So this is something that bothers me a lot lately. And why do the United States—people in general—are at war?

Dawn Walsh: Have you gotten any answers for yourself?

Sandra Perrin: I think it's coming from this type of economy. I'd say yes, money, for the United States. I wouldn't say just for the United States. Europe, it's based on the same type of economic system, based on capital, and you've got to accumulate, and that means that you also have accumulate space if you belong to this type of economy.

Dawn Walsh: Have you thought about what it would take make in shift and a change in that type of thinking and living?

Sandra Perrin: [laughs].

Dawn Walsh: That's a pretty big question I know.

Sandra Perrin: Yeah, if you want people to live without refrigerators and TVs [laughs]. I'll say that with this type of economy that we have, you have too much poverty, and that doesn't help the peaceful type of life, especially when you have a television that other people don't have—so, this is—I'd say that. The distribution of wealth is not good enough. There's no reason why people in Africa have to starve and die, and Americans can have three and four televisions in one house. I mean it's crazy. It doesn't make any sense. Do you have to have the latest gadget? Well, this is good because it make money go, but it still does not help peace in the world. Mainly because of the economic system, you have...if you are...if it's based on capital, it is your duty to accumulate—very simple. You give away a little bit, just to make you feel better. I think that is the bottom line.

Dawn Walsh: So that the accumulation of wealth hinders peaceful activity and harmony—I suppose, maybe, that's what I'm thinking between people.

Sandra Perrin: You mean, it does not help.

Dawn Walsh: It doesn't help. Yeah, it hinders.

Sandra Perrin: Absolutely, yeah. Yeah, it's too much money for one person and not money—well, you see what's going on over at the corporations. They completely take over. I mean this is becoming to the point now where it doesn't have any hope, because we the people are just nothing. It is getting to the point where it's very difficult for us to say no.

Dawn Walsh: So did you follow then the WTO protests in Seattle recently?

Sandra Perrin: Uh, huh.

Dawn Walsh: And what are your thoughts about that, being how you just mentioned big business?

Sandra Perrin: Well, I think it's good. Actually, I'm very intimidated to say anything, because I don't completely understand it. I think, maybe, it's a way of having a better control over certain countries, economically—some kind of economical control. But, I'm not sure. I cannot figure out what is good in it, and for who—yes. Have you?

Dawn Walsh: It's pretty complex.

Sandra Perrin: Yes, this is why. No, I'm suspicious of the WTO. It's very simple. I'm very suspicious, but I don't know enough.

Dawn Walsh: Okay, let's come back to local politics then, back to Missoula and Missoula Women for Peace. So you mentioned, by time you were getting involved the Vietnam War was sort of coming to a close. After the Vietnam War ended, however, you did still continue to be involved in Missoula Women for Peace, and what became the focus for you after the war ended in terms of being an activist for peace?

Sandra Perrin: I think don't generalize the whole world. If you had a war, like in Iraq, then suddenly you have to, "Oh, I'm going to vocal about that and organize." I think one of things that people do, they should get together and organize, trying to voice your agreement, and that's good. But when you have a situation like this, like Iraq, it's based on financial opinions. It's not just people. It's a bigger thing over your head, and we the people can help to stop it. But the major reason is based on economics.

So at this point, being a member the Missoula Women for Peace for me is just being informed, being some kind of a watch dog, and whenever we can write cards or letter saying this is wrong. We can keep in touch with our Representative or our Senator, and say, "This is how we feel as the Missoula Women for Peace," and you do have a voice, some kind of voice connected with sanity. That's how I see it. This is why I continue to go the Missoula Women for

Peace, because at least it keeps me informed. I cannot involved in everything now. It would devour my life, or anybody's life. Flo Chessin, she is absolutely immersed, and I admire people like this. But not personally, I don't have the energy to do it. The best I can do is be informed when somebody asks me something, be informed enough to tell them, okay, I think this is what's going on, and maybe, put some clarity in somebody else's mind. But that's mainly what we do, some kind of a watch dog at the Missoula Women for Peace. There's always somebody who is going to come with an issue and say, "This is what's happening there." I have never heard of the situation, so I'll get informed.

Dawn Walsh: So what are some of the most recent issues that have been brought before Missoula Women for Peace?

Sandra Perrin: What is the country—the country just absolutely disintegrated. I forgot the name of it. Well, I was going to say, but I guess I cannot remember the name of the country. It's a very small country, and somebody was very involved with that issue, so we all got informed about that. I think Africa is also another hot spot. There's not much I can do about that one. We still can be informed of it. I'm giving you the same refrain here—keeping informed. We didn't talk much about WTO at the table—separately, yes. What do we have? Well, of course now, with the elections we're going to talk about that. What kind of a position we want to take now that the situation is clearer—we have two candidates instead of a multitude. And, of course, it has to be arranged around peace when we talk about the subjects. If we felt—we read the paper and if there's something that we do not agree with, then we'll make...we'll write the letter. Somebody people are really good at writing letters there. It's wonderful, and very good letters. And letters, evidently, are the best way to communicate the officials. They read letters more than postcards. I mean they actually listen to the opinions of the people.

Dawn Walsh: Have you had had some personal feedback or group feedback from some of the Representatives in Montana over the years?

Sandra Perrin: We've had lots of mail going with Baucus, less now. Now we have Williams, Mrs. Williams, who keeps in touch with us, and we are a strong supporter of her. We keep in touch with our Representatives and Senators so that they know about the Missoula Women for Peace and, Baucus, in particular, used to have regular meetings with us to see how wind was going from our direction.

Dawn Walsh: So how do you think you influenced Baucus?

Sandra Perrin: I actually don't know.

Dawn Walsh: But you believe that you did have an effect?

Sandra Perrin: Yes. I think that he is...what we have to offer did weigh on his opinion, yes. I cannot give you exact circumstances, but, yes, I think he took it seriously. Now we don't see him as often, but there will be others. We try to keep them informed, if not personally, at least by letters. And the letter is, probably, a better way of communicating, because it's just not effective—I'm against the bill and the number—It's not enough. In the letter you actually explain the process of thinking, and that's what our representatives like, I understand.

Dawn Walsh: Let's see, I'd like to ask you about Jeannette Rankin, because she is a big role model for many people. And how is your involvement with Missoula Women for Peace in working on getting the statue of Jeannette Rankin in Washington, D.C.? Were you a part of that at all?

Sandra Perrin: No, actually Connie Shousen is the person to talk to. She is actually the one who thought about it as an idea and then brought it to fruition, from beginning to end. She was the total force behind the statue of Jeannette Rankin in Washington. She succeeded. She did an amazing work. Have you had contact with her?

Dawn Walsh: Not yet. She's not in Missoula. She's going to be in Missoula this summer.

Sandra Perrin: Well, she is a treasure of information. You'd really enjoy her talk.

Dawn Walsh: I look forward to meeting her.

Sandra Perrin: No, I had nothing to do with it. I knew about it, and one day she said—she came to the meeting and said, "This is what we should do, because I went to Washington with this pot and just emptied it." And she did it—one person. So you can do it. So, no I'm sorry I cannot tell you—I cannot brag about the fact that I had something to with it.

Dawn Walsh: Just a couple more fast questions --- We are getting close the end. Can you just tell me some of the role models that you have had in terms of role models of peace?

Sandra Perrin: Martin Luther King, Angela Davis, all contemporary people to me. I'm not going back to Greek history here. I think, as a role model, I'll say Roosevelt, and as a thinker, I'd say Jefferson. He kept his slaves, but...I'd say recently, I'd say those two people. Martin Luther King and Angela Davis have done a lot to help develop the idea of justice. Jeannette Rankin, I don't have much—I don't know enough about her—just that she is the reason why women are voting. That's a good reason. That's an excellent reason as a matter of fact. But, personally, I'll say this, Martin Luther King and Angela Davis who I respect for what they have done, and still doing.

Dawn Walsh: Thank you. So before we end completely, I just want to give you an opportunity if there's anything that you'd like to say that we haven't covered so far, any closing summary statement?

Sandra Perrin: I'll say that the pursuit of justice is a non-ending pursuit. You really have to work at it. We cannot give up—but it will be. This is the type of concern that will not disappear.

Dawn Walsh: Well that you very much, Sandra.

Sandra Perrin: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]