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Paula Barletta Oral History

Born in the Sudetenland, Paula Barletta left Germany after surviving World War II, and later moved to Yuma, Arizona, with her American husband, where she became the food service director.

Interviewer: Beverly Lowe

Date: 4/19/06

Beverly Lowe: Today is April 19, 2006. I'm Beverly Lowe, and I'm in Yuma, Arizona interviewing Paula Barletta for some food nutrition insider information. Ms. Paula, it's so good to see you and have you with me today.

Paula Barletta: Well, thank you very much Beverly. It's my pleasure being here.

BL: And thank you for ordering up the wonderful day, weather and temperature.

PB: (Laughs) In Yuma, Arizona, you can find that any day.

BL: What I would like for the audience to know is would you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you grew up, and I know you have a interesting story about your trip to the USA.

PB: Well, yes. In all the things that happened to me, I guess you can say it is good what happened to me. At the time I didn't think so because in 1939, Konrad Henlein gave the Czech Republic, which was called Sudetenland, where all Germans were born, he gave that to Hitler and said, "Peace in our time." Only Hitler didn't know how to spell peace. Hitler thought that he meant that he wanted another piece and another piece and that's where World War II actually started. Later on, after World War II was over, we were deported to the Russian zone of Germany in an open cattle car-like train just like the Jewish people were deported. And we had no way of ever wanting to leave there but we had to. There were more than a thousand people aboard that train and it took us five days, which normally probably would take five hours to be on a train. But you have to remember World War II just happened, so it was pretty bad. We arrived in a small village and we had to stay in a barn and we just had to find a place where we could settle down. My father had already passed away and we just thought as being twenty years old at the time, that it was a neat trip that we were

taking only that trip turned out to be tragedy later on. In February of 1946, my older sister and I decided to go across the Iron Curtain, from the Russian zone into the American zone. It was a long hard travel but we made it there. And shortly after that, we were in Frankfurt in an underground air-raid shelter and we asked somebody if we could go and find a job here. Well a lady told us, "Well, you missed it by thirty kilometers. You need to go back and go to Bad Nauheim. It was a resort and hotels that were taken by the American forces and it was filled with GIs. And I got a job working as a nanny for a German movie star. One of the little girls I took care of name was Manuela. Needless to say, my first daughter's name is Manuela (laughter). Her husband was a doctor but she was a movie star and also a singer in Germany. And she was singing for General Patton in the headquarters when he came on weekends from Frankfurt into Bad Nauheim. At the time there was little food, but all she (the German movie star) had to do was tell any of the generals or colonels she needed stockings, coffee, or cigarettes. And they didn't bring her just the pound; they brought her a case (laughter). And then she would go with her husband to Munich and trade all of these things and traded it in for food. And one of these days when I was supposed to pick her up... and in Germany you always bring flowers to people when you pick them up after travel. Well, I had neither money nor any way of getting it so I stole the flowers growing by the church. And at the time I didn't know that my husband was watching what I was doing on the other side of the street. He followed me, and believe me, our conversation was kind of one sided because he didn't speak German and I didn't speak English.

BL: So you are saying that he was your future husband?

PB: Future husband. Yes! Then he became my husband!

BL: Romance.

PB: Then he asked me where I was going. Then he wanted to take me to eat somewhere...then I said, "No, I have to go to the train station and pick up my boss." And thinking back it was a one-sided conversation. I went to the train station and who didn't show up was my boss and his wife. She was very fragile, blond, maybe like eighty-five or ninety pounds and five foot six. So, Ralph then, who later became my husband, said I shouldn't make it so hard for him. He said that I should just follow him and he would buy me dinner at the PX or the commissary, whichever, and I said, "No, I have to go home." Then he asked the

next day what I would do tomorrow and I said, "Go to the railroad station again." (laughter). Well, to make it short, surely enough the next evening he waited there. And it was curfew at this time in Europe. You had to be off the streets at a certain time. And we walked to the railroad station and who came down the stairs was Helga and her husband. And Ralph just took a Woops! and left and she said "Did I just see you with a GI?" She always wanted me to meet a GI! I said, "Yeah, forget it." She said, "Well, go on... you're free to go now." I said, "Well, if he wants to see me, he knows where I live, so he can come and see me." She said, "Well, he can come see you." This was the beginning of my coming to the United States. I asked for an immigration number and my immigration number was ready to come. And I came on a battleship named WW Huns; we were over a thousand immigrants and Ralph by then was already my sponsor and the money was waiting in New York. I was going to Chicago because I knew a lady that I had worked previously before and so out of the bad things came the most beautiful things and if it had not happened that we were deported then I wouldn't be sitting here today with you.

BL: That's a success story for school lunch, too. We are going to talk about your history with school lunch. What is your earliest recollection about school meals, when did you start working?

PB: Well, after we came from Chicago to Arizona, Ralph, who was transferred, was in the Air Force and I wanted to go and work some place. Ralph said to me, "Why don't you just go to school and apply for a job in the cafeteria? You love to eat, you love to cook, and you love to bake." So sure enough, I went the next day and three days later I had a job.

BL: And what school district was that?

PB: School District 1 that I'm still working today.

BL: That's Yuma?

PB: That's Yuma, Arizona.

BL: And what did you do next after they hired you?

PB: They hired me, and I went to a school that just had opened. It was called Palmcroft School and Mr. Foster was the principal. They had two people already working and they hired me. It grew so big from the opening that they hired another person. Her name was Mary Solo, who later on also became a manager. I was in the cafeteria at Palmcroft for one year, and the next year I became a manager at a school named Gwyneth Ham Elementary.

BL: You were a fast learner.

PB: Well, I loved, literally loved the children, and I always wanted to make sure that they do eat right because I was at one time, I did not have the food that I needed. So, this is what made me want to be in school food service.

BL: Well, did you have a mentor or anyone that encouraged you in school nutrition programs.

PB: Well, my first boss was Carol Johnson, who went on to work at the Arizona Department of Education. She was the one who kind of told me the direction that I need to take. I took some summer classes, and I took some Arizona Western College classes. Of course, when I left Europe, I went only to eighth grade and after that, when I wanted to become a sales girl in Germany, they sent me to some evening classes that were college courses. A sales girl just can't walk in and be a sales girl. That person has to have a certificate for being a sales person.

BL: You said that you were in Yuma #1, and then you were an employee for one year, and you were a manager in the same school, then what happened?

PB: Well, then I worked for several years at our Main Cafeteria, that was what it was called, and then I was sent to another school in our district, a brand new school, Gwyneth Ham. Then I became the Food Service Director in 1978. We kind of had a problem in our food service department. It got kind of in the red, let's call it what it is. So, I asked the associate superintendent, my boss, if he would just give me the chance that I would promise to go and bring it out of the red and we would go and work greatly. So, two years later we were out of it. And I was lucky to have the person who knows all the numbers, our past president Karen Johnson, now as my boss. And she was my bookkeeper at one time.

BL: Well, isn't that a nice story to hear. (laughter) And she ended up being...

PB: The food service director when I retired. In the school year 1988-89, I retired. And at home, after retirement, I did some travel, but I was watching television from seven in the morning 'til almost ten at night. And I said, "There's got to be more to life than watching television." So, I asked Karen, who was first working for me, because she had my job then as food service director, if she wouldn't have an opening. Well, about four weeks later I had a job, and I'm still there enjoying life.

BL: And what do you do at that job?

PB: Well I bake, I cook... anything that comes along.

BL: What kind of baking? I know you're noted for certain things. I'm just trying to get you to tell me what they are.

PB: Well, we do all of our hamburger buns in every school. We do all of our hot rolls. We even do the occasional cinnamon rolls. We used to have more, but since we're talking health. We also experiment on new recipes with whole wheat flour and milk to make it whiter, and we're working on that too. So, we're not standing still.

BL: And did I hear that you have some catering things that you do?

PB: I did the catering when I was a manager. So, I enjoyed doing the catering, and I loved making wedding cakes, and I did this for several years. I baked and decorated the cakes at home and made several different recipes, and catered at the same time.

BL: What kind of changes have you seen? You have had a long and lustrous career in different positions. Tell us about the changes.

PB: First of all, I still remember when we used to get whole roast beef from the USDA. Some of the people that I know used it...not in our school district, but they took it and ground it up into hamburger meat. They didn't know how good this really was. When I was manager, we did not have salad bars for all students. [Now], we have salad bars for all schools starting with first grade. We have three choices in the junior high schools, so that keeps them busy.

BL: And there are two raw fruits and vegetables now?

PB: Yes, very much so. It's unbelievable that children who will come and go will go to the salad bar and pick spinach of all things that is mixed in with the salad and is very green looking and you can see it. But they are picking a salad with the dressing.

BL: Tell me about some special occasion things. Did you all use to do some geographical menus and some food things along with costumes?

PB: Well, our school food service things that we did in the evenings, we had sometimes different projects. Like one day we would go and say, "This is going to be for our meeting, a hat." You have to make the hat out of food so we baked our hats. We had a pan sitting underneath so that the dough would get really, really good and rise and then we baked it and put ribbons around it and some of the other people put vegetables and fruits on their hats and so it was just different.

BL: What about conferences? I know that you have been an advocate for educating the South and educating others and providing opportunities. And I also know that you have attended state and national conferences and had an active role. Tell me a little bit about those.

PB: Well, I did always enjoy being with other people and sharing and also wanting to hear from them because out there are people who have some great ideas, and you can mix them together. I enjoyed literally going to every conference, I met new people, I was on the national board as a Single Unit Chairman, and I was also West Regional Director on the national board.

BL: Tell me about some of the people who served on that, served on the board with you. I know that you remember some of those names.

PB: The first one when I was Single Unit Chairman was Louise Sublet and then the next term when I was on there was Lucille Barnett. I was in Denver at the board meeting when we selected Marshall Matz, our legislative council for SNA.

BL: So you got to vote for Marshall?

PB: Yes, I did.

BL: I think we can say that was a good decision.

PB: Yes. And I enjoyed every one of them on the board. There are just so many...I honestly have to say that I forget some of the names because my first convention was in 1962 in Cincinnati, that's the first one that I attended.

BL: And you did not miss too many between 1962 and when?

PB: Today! [Laughter] Or this year. I have just always enjoyed being with other people and sharing things and taking their advice also.

BL: Well, I know you were active at the national level; but didn't you take some active role in Arizona?

PB: Well, yes I was the chapter president, the state president, and I also was awarded just two years ago in Tuscan when they named our state conference closing general session after me. When we were at our convention the Mayor of Phoenix made it a Paula Barletta Day; now if you don't think that is an honor.

BL: Now this was a Paula Barletta Day in Phoenix during the state conference two years ago? That would have been in 2005, and I am sure that you have pictures to prove that.

PB: Yes, I do.

BL: Well, we will put those in the Archives. Well, what experiences or contacts have you had with people that you might want to share? Something that happened that was exciting to you or something that you took home...?

PB: If I had to tell you how many excitements that I have had in my lifetime since I entered the United States, we would be here for three hours.

BL: Well, limit them to three. [Laughter]

PB: Well, the closing session of the Arizona Food Service Association Conference is in my name and in my honor. I had the privilege of going with my boss, Karen Johnson, to LA where the manufacturing conference was where she was awarded an honorary doctorate and if you don't think that my buttons were bursting, then you are mistaken. [Laughter] So those are some of the highlights that have happened to me many, many times.

BL: You've had a charmed life my dear!

PB: Well, thank you.

BL: Now, I didn't say an easy life. [Laughter]

PB: Well, it would have never happened if Hitler hadn't gone so crazy and sent us away, so I can always say thank you!

BL: Do you have any children stories? You worked in the cafeteria, so you must have some children stories.

PB: Oh, we have a whole lot of them. The thing that I do to the students at Gila Vista Junior High is that I have fun with them, but I let them know that there is a fine line that they cannot step over because some of the boys and girls are just as happy as can be but then they forget that there [are] some rules. So I let them know very quickly what the rules are and then we can stay in shape, so it's just interesting.

BL: Well, I am excited to learn about the Paula Barletta Day, the Association's Paula Barletta Session, and having known Paula for a while, I think that those of us that have met her truly enjoy her friendship. What would you like to say that we have not covered in this interview, anything that you want to share?

PB: Well, it's the everyday changes that there are and you have to be willing to go and accept changes and not just saying, "Well, that's not for me." And I know that everyday changes do happen, so my philosophy is, "I give you my best every day." I may be eighty, but that doesn't mean that I couldn't work like one of those that was thirty-five. I just want to prove to them that it can be done and it can really work. And the association will help every one of them if they are just willing to work.

BL: Well I certainly appreciate your comments. Is there anything else that you want to add?

PB: I just wanted to be able to go and see everybody for the next ten years more.

BL: Come on now, that would make you ninety. You are at least going to be here for the next one hundred, two, or three. [Laughter] Well, thank you for your time

Paula, and its just been delightful having the opportunity going down memory lane with you. I do want to know what happened to the roast beef when the people grounded it up.

PB: Well I think that this is so unbelievable that somebody will say, "No that can't happen," but I do know that it did happen and why they would not go and use prime roast beef and not cook it and cut it and share it with the children the way that it was meant to be. Of course, we had a lot more commodities at the time.

BL: Now tell us about the commodities. Roast beef is a good story, but I am sure that there are some other commodity stories.

PB: Well, there are so many of them. Right now, our commodities are almost like half of what they used to get. There wasn't a thing that they wouldn't go and bring in. Let's see, we had fruit coming in. We also had peanut butter that is very scarce and we hardly don't get anymore. And we have excellent peanut butter bars, we just don't know it, and we make everything from scratch.

BL: Those peanut bars you are still making?

PB: Yes, we are still making them.

BL: I remember those myself. I know that at one time that we didn't get the fruits and vegetables like we do now with the DOD. We get them in cans etc. Did you ever receive any of those sweet potatoes that came in bushel baskets fresh?

PB: No, I don't ever remember that, but I do remember that when we used to get the potatoes there wasn't any instant potatoes to make mashed potatoes. We had to have a potato peeler where you cleaned it, and cut it up, and cooked it, and then you had mashed potatoes out of it.

BL: So things have changed?

PB: Oh, yes.

BL: That's about the amount of time that we have to finish the interview, so if there is anything else that you would like to share now would be the appropriate time to make a statement to the members or to your friends.

PB: Well, there are so many friends out there that I am almost afraid to just mention just one or two names. But I know one thing is that we have a dedicated food service director. We have not just a dedicated food service director, Karen Johnson, we have our national president and this will be something that I will always cherish. And she has not just become my boss; also my friend and we have traveled together to many, many places.

BL: Well, thank you so much Paula, and this has just been such a delightful day. Thank you so much for sharing your stories, your memories, and your struggle to get to the United States.

PB: Well, you are the one who is giving me the honor to be able to talk to you; all these years that I have known you and I am the one who is privileged, so I want to thank you so much.