

ORAL HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY IN CANADA

INTERVIEW

THÉRÈSE GOUIN DÉCARIE

THIS IS PART OF THE ARCHIVES, PART OF THE ORAL HISTORY OF  
PSYCHOLOGY IN CANADA. I AM TALKING WITH MADAME THÉRÈSE  
GOUIN DÉCARIE IN HER OFFICE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTREAL  
ON DECEMBER 21, 1976.

Q. Madame Décarie, let's start at the beginning.  
Where were you born?

A. I was born in Montreal in 1923.

Q. And what sort of a family -- what did your father do?

A. My father, who is still living, is a lawyer, a  
barrister, and further a senator. He was in the senate when  
he was, I think somewhere around 43, which was very unusual  
at that time.

Q. Really? Yes.

A. My mother is still alive also, very much alive,  
and . . .

Q. May I smoke?

A. Yes, of course. I'll get you an ashtray.

Q. Thank you.

A. Do you want me to close the door or anything?

(Tape appears to be shut off momentarily.)

Q. Your mother?

A. My mother, who comes from Quebec, has always been extremely active in the theatre, and she is really a playwright. She wrote one of the first plays in Quebec, and one of her plays was even played in Paris. After that she went into different things like gilding her own frames and doing some enamel, and she has never stopped working, so I come from a very, let's say in Ericson's<sup>2</sup> words, people who are industrious, in that sense.

Q. Yes, and artistic. Your mother obviously has artistic talent. What was the name of her play?

A. The first play was "Cocktail", and it was about people that meet at a cocktail (party), and after drinking, you know, the truth comes out.

Q. Yes.

A. It was a very -- at that time, I can't remember exactly when, but it was about nine or ten years before the war, so that was very unusual at that time.

Q. When you say your mother was born in Quebec, do you mean Quebec City?

A. Yes, Quebec City.

Q. I see. Well, now, what are your earliest recollections of your home? What was it like from the point of view of reading, for example? Was there lots to read?

A.           There was a great amount of books all around me. They were not interesting books for a child. They were very politically oriented. Maybe I had better give you some more points of reference. You'll have to stop me about my English. I haven't talked English for a while now. My great grandfather was . . . he was Prime Minister of the Province of Quebec. And my grandfather was \_\_\_\_\_, who was also Prime Minister of the Province of Quebec. My uncle, who unfortunately died a few days ago, separated himself from the political views of his own father and was the leader of the political party that in fact brought Duplessis to power, the Union \_\_\_\_\_ Nationale; but my father remained within the party of his own father, so that . . .

Q.           Which was what? The Liberal Party?

A.           The Liberal Party, which meant of course that all my childhood was, let's say . . .

Q.           In the midst of politics.

A.           . . . I was imprinted by (rest obscured by Q) . . .

Q.           You were right in the midst of politics.

A.           . . . and of the life of this province, so that of course they were books that were at that time international, let's say, documentation; and my father, who was extremely interested in foreign countries, who when he was at the Senate at the time was \_\_\_\_\_ to foreign affairs. He loved

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languages. He has learned Spanish, Polish, which I think is the most difficult language in the world, it seems. He tried to learn Russian. He knows, of course, Italian and of course English; but then it did mean that the usual activity of my parents was reading, or for my mother it was writing. That was the main thing (rest obscured by Q) .....

Q. Yes, yes. A very literary family, as well as political.

A. It was a great help.

Q. Yes. Were you able to read before you went to school?

A. We had at that time a very, let's say, elitist system, and we had someone who came from France and started us on reading and writing and arithmetic when we were very young. She was teaching in our own house . . .

Q. I see.

A. . . . but we were not alone. I mean there were about, something like children.

Q. Oh. You say "we", which implies you had some siblings.

A. Yes, I had an older sister, I had a brother, who is dead, and I still have a younger brother, so there were four of us.

Q. And you were the third?

A. I was the third.

Q. Religiously, it would be a Catholic family?

A. It would be a Catholic family.

Q. Very devoutly Catholic?

A. Yes, but not prejudiced, maybe because we had friends who came from almost all over the world and there was a lot of discussion at home. There were theatre people, of course, and they represented one of the different kinds of people that I was really used to. And then there were people like Senator \_\_\_\_\_, a wonderful agnostic. I think, though I'm not sure -- you know how recollections are -- that it was an open kind of family of, let's say, tolerance.

Q. Yes. From the point of view of -- you had your own family tutor; your family had the tutor from France . . .

A. For a short while; that is, only, let's say, for the first \_\_\_\_\_ years we had private lessons. When I look back on that it's another world.

Q. Yes. Now, when you were ready for school, where did you go?

A. I went to the Dames du Sacré Coeur -- that is the Sacred Heart Convent, and it was quite close to my home, and

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it was where my sister was already, and I did all my secondary studies over there, and what happened after a while was that most of those nuns came from overseas. There were quite a few French and German, which made it very tense situation during the war.

Q. Yes.

A. But there was -- if I go back, if I remember, they were remarkable women, but who were, in a way, not but saw their mission as one that was closely linked, let's say, to the development of the country. They were supposed to make the terms that always came back with young ladies out of us, (?) and young ladies meant that we would, I think, talk well and mainly behave quite well, know Latin, but not go on further to superior studies, and I remember very well the Superior that we used to meet. When we went to her office we used to wear

Q. That's a nice touch.

A. It's a nice and very old touch, and I remember she -- I wanted to go on with my studies, and she told me, "Young ladies do not have to go on to superior learning . . ." I'm not saying it right and she did say it right. I should find the right words. "Les études supérieures ne sont pas pour les jeunes filles." So it was something that was aimed at the same time to woman, let's say, and to a status. I think we were supposed to marry men who had gone on to superior studies

but we were not supposed to be

Q. Well, I've been very impressed by Dave Longet (?) and several others with the way in which, at a quite different socio-economic status than yours, one of a large family of children on a farm was early spotted by the local abbé as being very bright, and how he would go to the father and say "Now that eleventh child should go on with his education," and the farmer father saying "Well, I can't afford it," and the abbé saying "Don't worry about that, I'll get a local merchant or some wealthy person to underwrite it." I've been very impressed with this recruitment of young people by the Catholic church, no doubt in part to hope that they will enter the clergy, but not insistent on that, usually, as far as I can make out, but very early identification of bright young children. Now, were you -- how did you come to want to go on with studies? Were you identified as an unusually bright child?

A. There was -- it's funny what you are saying, because in fact there was an abbé who used to come and teach us religion, and I think he was appalled by the idea that here there were girls that didn't seem any less bright, let's say, than other girls that maybe he was meeting and that were going on to university, and that because of the kind of, let's say, closed atmosphere, we just weren't thinking about that very much, and he is really the first one who asked me the question, "What do you want to do? and do you want simply to marry, or wouldn't you like to study some more?", and I was -- it was more opening up -- I think my parents wouldn't have maybe mentioned it but maybe sometimes they would; I'm not quite sure.



But anyway he did mention then that it would mean, of course, that I would have to learn Greek and go much deeper into mathematics and things like that; and there were four of us who were interested and decided to do what was then called in our French "obtenir le Baccalauréat des Arts". And he was willing to help us, so willing that he crossed the Superior and decided to teach us, and began teaching us then Greek. We went, of course we already had started some Latin course. He taught us, I think, astronomy; mathematics at least he was quite at ease (?), but anyway there were those four girls completely outside of, you know, the usual routine of the school, having different hours and all that. I don't think we were breaking any windows, but we were beginning to do something very different, and that after a while could not be tolerated any more.

Q. By whom?

A. By the Superior, who suddenly, I think, said something like "I don't think you can stand us very (much) longer and we cannot stand you any longer in that kind of system," so that was almost -- it wasn't at the end of the year. It was in the middle of the year, I think, something like October or November. There were the four of us, very earnest about getting the B.A., not being able to go to what existed at that time, which was Marguerite Bourgeoys, and suddenly without any professor, in a way, so we decided well, there must be some professor somewhere, and we climbed --

because at that time there were quite a few students -- we climbed the stairs at the University of Montreal and we decided that we would find the professors of chemistry and physics and mathematics at the University of Montreal; and it was wonderful. We found them. The professors were not paid very much at that time, and they were quite ready to give like that private tuition to all four students.

Q. Although you -- none of you were eligible to be admitted to the University.

A. Oh no, we couldn't. No, no, because at that time you -- all your school studies within the colleges and the convent did nothing at the level of the university, so that there was no question about that, but it did mean then that I had absolutely wonderful teachers. In mathematics it was Abel Gauthier, who was a real professor who now has left the University. I had Monsieur for the physics and I had Monsieur Pichet in chemistry, who has been Vice-Rector, so I had, I think, the very best professors . . .

Q. What was the attitude of your parents toward this exclusion of you from the . . . ?

A. I don't remember any reaction.

Q. But they didn't oppose it, obviously.

A. I think that they just thought that we were able to try to fend by ourselves and that was the thing to do and they just let us do it.

Q. Was your older sister one of the four?

A. No, she wasn't. She became a nurse, and she is an excellent nurse. Married a doctor who is now the head of the Department of Physiology at Laval and has been president of the Royal Society of , so that she was a little older than I and she had already left the convent when we ran into that kind of , of battle, but I didn't feel it as a battle at all, it was just a series of circumstances.

Q. Uh, huh. And the ease with which you found professors willing to do this made it seem quite natural.

A. Yes. We were very, very fortunate.

Q. Have you any recollection of when you first heard the word "psychology" to have it have any real meaning for you?

A. I can't remember that. I know that when I decided to go to the university I hesitated between social service and medical school. I wanted to, maybe because I came from that, let's say, kind of family, I wanted to do something to help, and at that time a good way seemed to go to medical school or the social service -- the social school -- School of Social Service. Is that it?

Q. School of Social Work, we call it.

A. School of Social Work. Yes, that's what we call it too. School of Social Work. And I think that it must have

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mentioned at that time that the Department of Psychology

and that there you could -- I was interested in helping people, but more from the mental point of view than from the physical point of view, and that may be the best way to (rest inaudible) .

Q. Now what year was it that you climbed the steps in search of professors who would teach you?

A. That must have been in, ah -- around 1920, '21.

Q. Oh, that early? University of Montreal -- I thought it started in 1942.

A. You mean -- that -- when I tried to get some professors in physics and chemistry and . . .

Q. Yes.

A. Oh no. The University of Montreal -- I haven't got that in my effort at . .

Q. I see. It's away early.

A. It was not on the mountain. It was on St. Denis Street, and that must go back -- but here, I check for the dates: around 1920 . . .

Q. Oh, really?

A. . . . when they separated from Laval.

Q. And they first were downtown and then they built up on the mountain.

A. Yes, they were on St. Denis Street and of course you had -- you didn't have all the faculties at that time. We had only a few faculties. And then when they, let's say, went up the mountain, that must have been, ah, only around 1939, maybe; because it was a bright new thing when I came in.

Q. Now how long did you receive this kind of special tutoring?

A. Just for two years.

Q. Two years, at the end of which time you . . .

A. I had exams at that time.

Q. What, the regular baccalaureate?

A. The regular baccalaureate. There are quite a few subjects that we had to work by ourselves because we had no professors, like in geography or cosmology or things like that, and we did work by ourselves, which was fun.

Q. Yes, yes, it would be. And two years -- after two years of this you were then eligible to -- for admission to the University of Montreal.

A. That's it. I had my Baccalauréat des Arts and I was admitted then at the Department of Psychology, at which time,

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if I remember well, I was 22 (?) years old, but not any older than that.

Q. Hm hm. I guess that's what I'm thinking of. It was probably the establishment of the Department of Psychology with Father Mailloux (?) . . .

A. That's it.

Q. . . . that, uh . . .

A. I think it was 1940, the establishment of (rest inaudible) .

Q. And you decided to go into the School of Social Work?

A. No, no. I decided then that I would -- I forgot about the medical school and I forgot about the School of Social Work (Q and A speak simultaneously - neither can be understood) . . . interested in psychology.

Q. I see.

A. There were at that time, if I remember well, twelve of us, twelve students, and there was one full professor, which was Father , and something like twenty-three, then, lecturers. So that's really the beginning.

Q. Oh? Who else?

A. Um, there was -- well, there was Abel Gauthier, who

had taught me mathematics and was our professor of statistics. There was Fernand , who was one very remarkable professor who has been (inaudible) of the Science Councils and who taught us biology. There was Dr. Babine (?), who was the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and he taught us embryology, and I'm trying to remember some of the others.

Q. Adrien Pinard hadn't come . . .

A. He was a student.

Q. Oh.

A. He was a student . . .

Q. Was he?

A. He was one of the very first students, and he was just for two years -- he must have registered the first year of the Department of Psychology. He was just one year ahead of me.

Q. Well, now, what was the next stage -- the next achievement?

A. Well, I was<sup>?</sup> the first student with a B.A. in psychology. I wrote my Master's thesis and it was, I think, a bad<sup>?</sup> work. It was a study on the, let's say the kind of integration of children's drawing with the stories that they wrote to tell about their drawing. There was already a lot of

(A - continued)

documentation on children's drawing and the group had something on children's drawing. My interest was to see what -- once a child has drawn something, will he talk about it, and to try to understand the drawing through the abilities of the child, and at that time I just met children at summer camp where I went for two summers related to documentation that was the main thesis. My orientation was clinical and at that time the centre of was Le Centre de by Father Mailloux, who was very psychoanalytically oriented, and we<sup>were</sup> trained then at that

Q. Was this a phase during which Karen Macover's work was -- drawing of children was very prominent?

A. Yes, it was known at that time, and already we had a course with testing the procedure, but that was something very, very different. What struck my very much at that time, I often mention that to my students, I was not convinced at first, you know, of the validity of some Freudian hypotheses, but just seeing some of the drawings of those children who came from the low socio-economic level and certainly could not have been (obscured by Q.)

Q. Couldn't possibly have been exposed to the Freudian theory.



A. No, for me it was really a revelation, and I got very interested in psychoanalysis and very slowly also I began to be talked into working at the national service here (??) and decided then to start working for my Ph.D. on the theory that it would be possible to try to bring together some of the Freudian hypotheses relative to the development of in childhood, and some of the (rest of sentence inaudible).

Q. And did you do this work -- you shifted from drawing to a theoretical approach to child development after the Master's level.

A. Well, not immediately after the Master's level. I really tried to train in clinical psychology for the two years during which I stayed in Canada, and I worked very little on my thesis at that time. I think we really were working very, very hard. I remember coming back when the Centre was at -- it still is -- and I remember coming back about four evenings per week along about, you know, ten thirty or eleven o'clock, and in fact I think we had very little time and it might be unfortunate, but we couldn't do everything at the same time. We had very little time to think even about our project. We were very down to earth and we children already being supervised by Father Mailloux. I left after finishing just the needed credits for the Ph.D. I left for France, where I married, and my husband is a philosopher

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specializing in Greek philosophy, and I really, I was studying but much more in love than studying. I worked

at the Centre Medico-Pedagogique and that also was still clinically oriented. Dr. Béanjou (?) was really very, let's say,

for a young girl coming from Quebec and I really began working on my <sup>Ph.D.</sup>thesis only when I came back and when I was already lecturing at the University of Montreal; and at that time, helped by my husband, who is a man who is very, let's say, exigent, I began to apply (myself) to learn German so I could read and of course there was no problem for me in reading Piaget, and it started me at that time on a road which I have never left and I'm still working on it.

Q. Yes. Dan Burlion (?) has told me he worked for two years in Geneva with Piaget. He has recently died, did you know?

A. No.

Q. Yes.

A. When was this?

Q. Oh, about a month ago.

A. How terrible!

Q. Very shocking, yes.

A. I did not know.

Q. At the age of 52 -- a tragic thing -- cancer. But he has told me that in his opinion the slow recognition of Piaget's greatness was due in large part, he thinks, to the bad English translations that were available. Do you share that view?

A. Yes, I do. I believe that here Piaget was, let's say, underestimated because there was -- it's only one aspect of the problem of language. (Q. Yes.) He was not only badly translated, he was incoherently translated. It is, especially let's say in the level of infancy, what Piaget had written on sensorimotor intelligence. There are three books, and you cannot really read the third one without having read the second and the second without having read the first; but it was the third one that I (Q coughs) first, and that would be for a very simple reason: the titles -- the subtitle became the main title in the English translation. In French it is "La Formation du Symbole", and the subtitle is "L'Invention, Jeu et Rêve" -- it might be something else, I'm not so sure I remember -- and it was the subtitle that became the main title, and then it was "Play, Dream and Imagination in Childhood", and when you put "dream" somewhere in a very clear-cut way you open the door to sexuality, (Q. Sure.) and you make it then -- you can make it a book that would sell. But that was ridiculous. (Q. Yes.) Piaget has always said that this -- those three books are a trilogy and that you cannot separate them.

Q. They had a birthday party for Piaget in Paris last summer.

A. Yes, August the 9th.

Q. Yes. Were you there?

A. No. I . . . / (end of Side 1 of tape)

Q. Apparently this birthday party was for him a highly emotional affair. He received the usual eulogies, but when he got up to speak himself, my colleague, who is in the child development area, and who was there -- I had to be at another session as a participant -- but she said that the most startling thing was that Piaget refused to talk about what he had done and he insisted on talking about what he was going to do -- a forward-looking man at eighty-four!

A. That's very of him. I had to interview him because the usual interviewer had lost his voice and it was an hour-long interview. I was terrified, and at the very end I had looked at some of the previous interviews. One had been simply beautifully done -- it was -- and it had been an interview of Rostand, who was a biologist