

BARBARA OSOFSKY

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(interviewed by Kenneth A. Ross)

This interview took place in New Orleans, Louisiana.

When did you get interested in mathematics?

I don't remember. I've been interested all my life. There's a family story that, at age 2 or 3, I was asked and solved problems like: How long will it take to travel 50 miles going 25 miles per hour? My earliest mathematical memory is when I figured out that area is in square feet because feet is linear.

My father was a chemist, and my mother was a school teacher. My 19 months-old sister, Joy (Tamar Joy Kahn), was a good student, but wasn't so mathematical. We were treated as individuals. When we were in college, my parents encouraged us to prepare to support ourselves. My sister majored in French, worked for NSA (National Security Agency) as a translator, and later was a librarian. We had the normal rivalry, but nothing unusual.

I grew up in East Fishkill, a village in Dutchess County about 70 miles north of New York City. When I was in the fifth grade, we moved to Buffalo, New York.

Did you ever consider fields other than mathematics as a vocation?

I loved math in high school. There was an especially good teacher, and I was disappointed that I didn't get into her geometry course. But she was my teacher for the next two years, so I had an excellent calculus course in high school. My teacher urged me to go to Radcliffe, but my parents were concerned about the expenses. So I attended Cornell on a Merit Scholarship.

I started as a pre-med math major, partly because I knew my mother had wanted to be a doctor. But her family was very poor; they had come to this country as immigrants around 1900. The normal options for women were teaching or secretarial, but medicine was also a

good field. I took chemistry and detested the labs, which ended my pre-med career. I convinced my parents that I could make a living as a mathematician. At Cornell, I was part of a group of very good math students who all ended up with Ph.D.s. I took the Putnam Exam each year and worked up to 13th place in my senior year.

At Cornell, I met Abe and we got married. After graduation, we moved to New Jersey, because Abe had a job there at Bell Labs. I was pregnant with the first of our three children. After the baby was born, I wanted to go back to work part-time. Bell Labs wouldn't consider this option, so I got a four-course teaching job at Douglas College of Rutgers, New Brunswick, when my daughter was less than a year old. (Douglas College was previously called the New Jersey College of Women.)

After another year, I decided to go back for the Ph.D. I did graduate work at Rutgers, and I obtained my Ph.D. in 1964. My thesis advisor was Carl Faith. Next year there will be a celebration of his 80th birthday and my 70th birthday at Ohio University in Zanesville.

What was the special attraction of mathematics?

I loved math because it involved reasoning. I also liked the challenges of solving "puzzles."

How did you get involved in the MAA?

I was given an MAA membership early at Cornell. I liked the *Monthly*, especially the problems. I didn't attend meetings until the end of the 1960s or early 1970s. Once I started attending meetings, I found myself on both AMS and MAA committees.

Did you receive mentoring in the MAA at the early stages of your career?

No.

What accomplishments in the MAA are you especially proud of?

I was on many committees, but most of them had specific purposes, so we knew when the job was done. It was rewarding to see good editors, whom our committees had selected, and to see awards given that we'd been involved with. I was chair of the Chauvenet Prize Committee, the Beckenbach Book Prize Committee, and twice on a committee to select a Monthly editor. I was also First Vice President during 2000-2001.

I served on many program committees. I chaired the last program committee for a joint AMS-MAA summer meeting; that meeting was in Seattle in 1996. I also chaired the first program committee for an MAA MathFest, which was held in Atlanta in 1997. Since the MAA was on its own for this meeting, the committee took this opportunity to re-examine all the programming. It was a pleasure to work with the Associate Secretaries Don Von Osdol and Jim Tattersall.

Are there any efforts of yours in the MAA that you are disappointed with?

Generally not, because the committees had specific charges which made our chores clear. When I chaired the Short Course Committee, the first year's Short Course was a disappointment, but after that the program was good. There was hope that the Short Courses would make money for the MAA.

What changes have you seen in the MAA since you first became involved?

The number of women that are active and visible is much better. I no longer feel different because I'm a woman. In general, the MAA is a warm and comfortable group. I feel that Project NExT has been an excellent advancement for the MAA. There are still tensions between mathematics and mathematics education/teaching. I'm concerned because it's important to keep people alive mathematically. So far, the MAA has managed a good balance, but there are persistent pulls toward more program emphasis on education.

I know you've been active in the AMS as well as the MAA. What should I know about your AMS activities?

I was on the AMS Council and managing editor of the Proceedings from 1974 to 1977. Blind refereeing was a big issue then, though I wasn't concerned about it and this didn't cause much extra work. More important was the need for a clear statement of editorial policy which could be used in explaining rejections of papers, and this was accomplished.

I also served on JPBM (Joint Policy Board for Mathematics) and CBMS (Conference Board of the Mathematical Sciences), both when they were in the process of restructuring.

I note that you're a member of AWM. Were you involved beyond membership?

No.

Have you been active in any other organizations?

No.

What personalities have stood out in the mathematical community, in the MAA and elsewhere?

The MAA Associate Secretaries Don Von Osdol and Jim Tattersall have been terrific.

My heroes are AMS fellows, like Hy Bass, Irving Kaplansky and Saunders Mac Lane, who have been outstanding algebraists and also active in MAA.