

An Interview with Sonia Lang

Part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library
Immigrants' Stories Oral History Project

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Interviewer: Carol Esarey

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Esarey: Hello, this is Carol Esarey. This is an interview this morning with Sonia Lang. The date is October 25, 2010. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Immigrant Stories project. We're going to get started. Right now we are in Sonia's home in Springfield, Illinois, for this first interview. Okay Sonia, I think we will start at the beginning. If you will give me your full name, where you live and where you were born, we'll start with that.

Lang: My name is Aspasia Sonia. [My] married name is Lang, and my former name or maiden name is Anyfantaki. I was born on the island of Crete. I'm registered at Heraklion, Crete because Father was too lazy to put all the details in the application. I was actually born in a village called Astrakoi, during World War II.

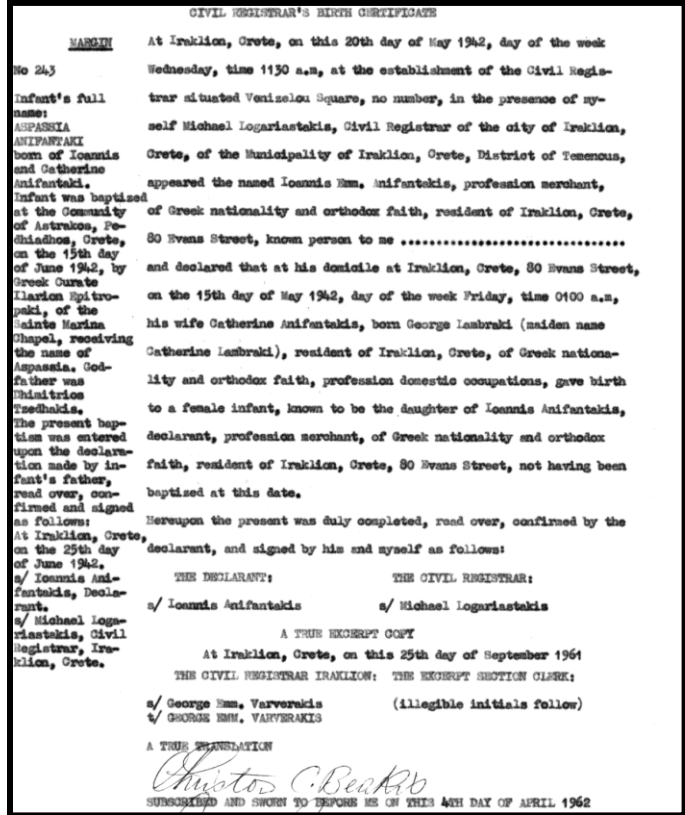
Esarey: As we go through this, I'll point to the word list, and you can write down the names to make sure I understand that we've got that. Your date of birth?

Lang: It is May 15, 1942, and I always claim I'm still thirty-nine.

Esarey: And you can continue to do so.

Lang: I hope so. It gives me more energy. (Both laugh)

Esarey: All right. Would you talk a little bit to us about your mom and dad? You gave us a copy of a family tree, and we have pictures surrounding us here. If you [the reader] could see all the pictures that are in this kitchen, you would see Sonia's family, and she has a wonderful notebook of pictures. We're going to start by going back to your mom and dad if we could. Where was your mother born? Tell me a little bit about your mother.



The birth certificate that was issued to Sonia before her marriage in 1961. This is her first birth certificate with her birth name. The birth certificate gives details of her birth in Greek and English.

Lang: My mother was born in the village of Dafnes. It's about twenty minutes' drive from Heraklion, and at the time, it belonged to the area of Malevizi. That was the district. Now, everything falls under just Heraklion. It's just easier. She had many brothers and sisters, and I have a family tree that I have already started. I just need it printed.

Esarey: She had many brothers and sisters?

Lang: Her father was a teacher. His name, by the way, was George Lambrakis.

Esarey: This is your father?

Lang: Grandfather, whom I never met.

Esarey: Grandfather, okay.

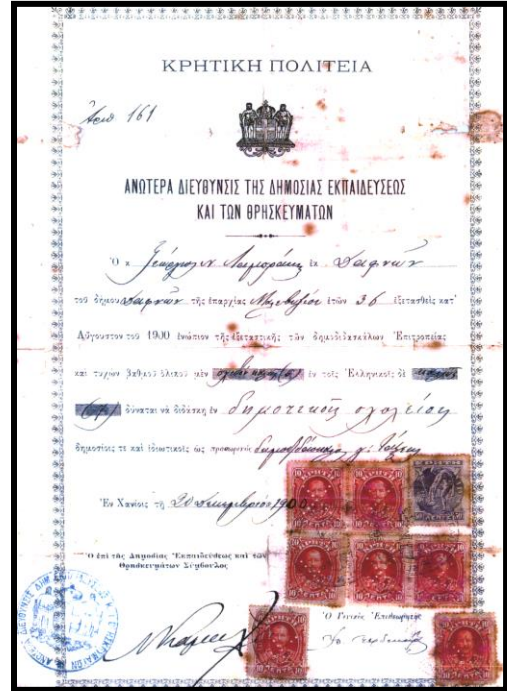
Lang: He was married to Athena Poloudaki. She came from the village of Pobia, which is south of Heraklion at the very beautiful and very productive plain of Messara.

Esarey: It would be here?

Lang: It will be down here, in this big area here.

Esarey: What we're doing is looking at the map and locating where family members lived.

Lang: Apparently my mother's family was quite educated in their own ways. They even allowed the girls to go to school, at least grade school, since this was available at the village. Her father was a very strict teacher, by the way. I have a copy in the files here of his teaching certificate that shows that he received the teaching certificate at the age of thirty-six.



Giorgos Lambrakis's teaching certificate. The red stamps are tax stamps in the independent state of Crete.

Esarey: Tell me his name again.

Lang: George Lambrakis.

Esarey: Sonia has some pictures of all that relates to that. When did this happen? What time period are we looking at?

Lang: My grandfather was born in 1864. So, if you take the thirty-six into account, he got his certificate in the year 1900. He survived all kinds of insurrections in the area, against the Turks, who were ruling the island at the time. Well, they had been there for a few centuries, so he experienced war. I'm not sure he ever participated in any of that.

Esarey: That's an interesting statement about war. Your family lived with the threat of war or with soldiers. Talk about that just a little bit.

Lang: Yes, oh yes. For a few thousand years, we've been the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, still are. It's a beautiful island, mountainous. Thank goodness for those mountains, because all the rebels used to hide up in the caves in the mountains. They knew every little path that only goats could climb. They fought for their freedom, generation after generation after generation. They never stopped.

Esarey: Were any members of your family, fighters?

Lang: Well, I'm sure, from both sides of the family, that some of the men were fighters. The young men always had to fight for their freedom or defend their families or just ignore a few things, just to survive.

Esarey: Were there any particular family stories that you have heard about of those early days?

Lang: Well, my mother's side of the family is not too well-known to me because my grandparents were dead. The house had gone to my mother's oldest brother, Michael, who took good care of it, apparently. We didn't visit the village very often. But my father's family, on the other hand, was closer by.

As a matter of fact, the bus stop was only three blocks south of our home, past the old gate that was into the fort that surrounded those ancient walls. Those walls were old because they were built originally by the Arabs and improved by the Venetians. In that particular city of Heraklion are the large castles called *Megalo Kastro* (the big castle/fort).

Well, you know, we were able to visit the village more often. As a matter of fact, when I was a little kid, the peasants still called Heraklion *Kastro*, which meant castle. So, I became not Sonia from such a village, but Sonia Kastrini. That is, I came from the castle.

Esarey: Oh.

Lang: We would take the old, old bus. Remember the type? Oh, you don't remember. It wasn't in this country. But they used to crank them up, just to warm up the engine. They break down every five minutes, yes.

Esarey: I'm old enough to remember.

Lang: It takes twenty minutes by car today to reach that village, with improved roads and short cuts and sort of like a highway. In those days, it could take you the whole day to get there by bus. Of course, it stopped every five miles to drop off somebody or pick somebody up, and they had all their belongings on the roof of the bus. They would have a rope weaved through every package and some kind of a tarp thrown over it and tied down that had to be redone. It was very confusing, but it got you there.

Esarey: What time period are we talking about?

Lang: We're talking about the '40s.

- Esarey: Nineteen-forties, okay. Your mother and your father were where in the nineteen-forties?
- Lang: At the beginning, right after the war started, when the bombing started, they went to the village of Astrakoi. They left everything behind.
- Esarey: Let's just move right on to that time period, then. You were born in 1942, and your brother was born in 1940. So, the children were very small when your parents were in this village.
- Lang: Well, they were in Heraklion when the war started. I wasn't born yet.
- Esarey: Okay.
- Lang: Well, once the bombs started, apparently they found a way to get to the village, away from the city and the bombing. My brother was just a baby. My grandfather had a tiny little place, which was more like one room by itself. It probably had a little fireplace for cooking and heating. So, they moved in there. Shortly after, father went up to the border of Albania to fight against the Italians.
- Esarey: Your father did?
- Lang: Yes, you see, war was declared on Greece in 1940, and it was October 28, when Mussolini asked the Greek prime minister, Metaxas, who happened to be dictator at that time, to let the Italian troops march through Greece. His answer was just one word, "*Okhi*," which means no.
- Esarey: That's what he said?
- Lang: That was it.
- Esarey: What happened?
- Lang: So, people volunteered right away to defend Epirus. Epirus is in the northwest part of Greece, and it's adjacent to Albania. So, they went up into those mountains. Winter was coming in. It was October and November by the time they got there. They had to fight with the bare minimum of arms, equipment and communication between the troops. There was hardly any food. The peasants would give them something along the way. My father remembered his feet were always frozen and that they carried anything that they could on their backs for their survival. But, their main meal would be a handful of raisins, for a day. And yet, they kept those Italians at bay, which frustrated Hitler.

So, he declared war on Greece. He said, "I'll show you how to do it." Not only that, but, at the same time, he decided to conquer Crete because, as Greece was falling to the armed forces of the Nazis, everybody, including the government and certain foreigners and foreign troops, were trying to stop them at Crete. Even the British went to the island of Crete. So, we had the king and the prime minister and everybody else on Crete trying to find a way to get to Africa for security. Fortunately, when the Germans finally attacked, it was by air.

Esarey: Paratroopers.

Lang: The paratroopers. Hitler was training them for a long time. He was sure that he would have the island surrender within twenty-four hours. But, of course, it took him several weeks. The people resisted, including my grandfather, who was probably was hiding in the fields, with a pitchfork or whatever. Everybody, including women and children, would throw rocks or anything against the paratroopers to make it tough on them.

Esarey: When they landed?

Lang: When they were landing. Believe it or not, Hitler lost several thousand special troops. While they were busy fighting on the island, these troops could not move to other places, such as the Middle East.

Esarey: They didn't anticipate the resistance.

Lang: No, no. Although he started with the bombardment, his paratroopers could not finish the job right away.

Esarey: Did your mother participate?

Lang: She never said. I don't think so. She was probably being a good mother, staying home with the baby. Father was away, so she was not going to make any waves right away. Although she was writing some couplets, in the Cretan dialect, about the war and, I guess, the invading forces. Eventually, of course, the island was conquered.

I remember my grandfather, from the village there. He had some scars on his arms, but those were from when he was a young man. He was born, according to his ID, in 1875, so he would have been twenty-five the year that Crete was liberated. Well, as a young man, he probably had to fight the Turks somewhere along the way.



Emmanuel Anyfantakis'
Kingdom of Greece ID, issued
in Kastilli, Crete in 1946, after
the Germans left Crete. It states
that he was born in Mochos,
Crete, in 1875.

Esarey: ...had scars?

Lang: Um-hmm, he had those scars.

Esarey: It sounds like the men of the family had to fight in every generation.

Lang: Every generation, including my generation too and my husband's generation.

Esarey: Yes, that's another story, which we will talk about at some point.

Lang: When mother lived at the village, she remembered the sound of the boots marching through the cobblestones.

Esarey: Describe that.

Lang: To her, it was just like they were coming after her. Of course, they would just hit the door with the butts of their weapons and say, "English, English." In other words, they were looking for English people, who were trying to hide. They would just break in right away, and she would be grabbing her baby.

Esarey: And she was in the small village at that time.

Lang: A very small village. She was a little bit the odd-ball, because the women at the time dressed like they did in the Muslim times, with the scarves, dark clothing, cover their heads. Sometimes they would pull up the scarf close to their nose. She came with her silk stockings and high heels and hats to wear to church, with fancy clothes. Men I met there, in 2000, actually remember her, because she was so different.

Esarey: She wasn't going to do that was she? She wasn't going to dress in those clothes.

Lang: No way.

Esarey: She remembers the German soldiers.

Lang: She remembers them. My brother, when he was little, all he remembers was shiny helmets.

Esarey: He has big memories, since he was very small.

Lang: I talked with some cousins, and they said that the Germans would take over the whole house or part of the house to stay in, because there were no barracks or anything for them to stay, during the occupation.

Esarey: What happened after the occupation? Or perhaps I should ask, what happened when the Allies came through?

Lang: Well, during the occupation, my father was sent to a hard-labor camp, which wasn't really a camp like we're thinking of. They sent him to repair the airport and extend the airport on Crete, in Heraklion, so they could land more planes.

When the Allies finally helped us find our freedom, everybody was trying to find their homes, if they were still standing. Thank goodness ours had survived the bombing, and they were able to recover most of their furniture.

Esarey: That's amazing.

Lang: But life was extremely tough.

Esarey: Food?

Lang: Food. I remember a lot of bean soup, not only for us, but Mother would send me with a whole pot of the bean soup, to take to a family who had six to seven children, so they wouldn't go hungry. And lots and lots of bread, which we had to stand in line for. I remember standing with the little coupons for soap or for sugar and crying every time I would hear an airplane fly over, probably from the fear of bombs.

Although I had not experienced it, everybody talked about it. Apparently we had an infestation of fleas and lice. Smoke planes, like you had a crop duster in the States, would be flying over the houses, in the cities and the villages, to spray against those bugs. All of us children would hide under the furniture, because we didn't know what was coming.

Esarey: You lived in fear.

Lang: We lived in some kind of fear. Even now, when I get to the fireworks, on the Fourth of July, if I'm close enough to actually smell the gunpowder, something in me just freezes.

Esarey: What happens?

Lang: Panic. Well, as a child, there were all kinds of shootings. There was a firing squad on a daily basis in some villages and probably in ours, if anybody dared do anything out of line, especially if they were caught.

Esarey: Were these things that you heard about or you experienced?

Lang: I wouldn't know what I experienced or what I heard, because those stories were repeated over and over again.

Esarey: They became part of you, as a child.

Lang: Oh, yes. That's another reason, in my art, I depict war or anything to do with violence because—

Esarey: There's some sorrow in your art.

Lang: There's sorrow, but to me it's that we should avoid war and violence.

Esarey: Your brother, does he talk about memories? He's a couple of years older.

Lang: Well, he was older, and he was remembering, as a child, that my father was trying to make ends meet. He had a place, a store. Above that was our apartment. There was, fortunately, still a little garden left, an open court. We had my beautiful pomegranate tree and flowers and grew a few little vegetables in pots.



Aspasia (Sonia) Anyfantakis, 4 years old, & her brother Giorgos (George) Anyfantakis, 6 years old, 1946

But my brother remembers that he helped Dad with tanning of lamb skins and little kid skins from the goats, so that leather could be used for shoes. His job, as a little boy, was to go outside the city limits, to the area where the little creek was and all the bamboo. They used to stretch the skin on a big bamboo poles and let it lean against something to treat, after it was dipped in all those chemicals. His job was to keep the flies away.

Esarey: Did he have a job? Was he able to work?

Lang: Well, my father was very enterprising. Fuel was difficult. He found a can, which was probably used to carry either gasoline or olive oil or something, and cut a hole in the lower part, just almost like a little doorway. He found another smaller can that would fit towards the center, and he would go around collecting sawdust from all the carpenters in the area, stuff the big can with sawdust and push it down real tight. Then, he would remove the center. That way, you have an open chimney. He would light it, and it would burn slowly. On top of that, he would put a pot. So the pot would not put out the fire, he used some kind of a metal triangle or something, a little grill of some sort.

Esarey: He invented a way to keep you warm.

Lang: Oh yes, but that was for cooking.

Esarey: And cooking.

Lang: That was the cooking stove. For heat, we had a brazier, which stood on three legs, was round and shallow. If you had the money for coal, that's what you used to warm your hands with, in the winter. In most cases, you just didn't. I went to school wearing gloves and a coat in the classroom.

Esarey: Where did you go to school?

Lang: I went to what is called the Fourth Elementary school in Heraklion. It was behind St. Titus church, which was my parish. St. Titus Church still stands, after a few centuries of being built and re-built and razed to the ground. This is also the church where George and I were married in.

Esarey: Do you have a picture of that?

Lang: I have a picture in there. The church still stands. It has expanded and now has a second floor. They are on a web page, believe it or not. They have their own web page, which is in Greek.

Esarey: Well, you can help me.

Lang: Well, apparently the web page is under construction, like a lot of things on the Internet.

Esarey: We'll work with the picture that you have, because it's an important church in your life.

Lang: Not only that, but I do have a picture of the school that I took about six years ago. I'll look to find it right away. It's in one of the albums.

Esarey: How many years did you go to that school?

Lang: Six years.

Esarey: Six years. Then what happened for your education?

Lang: This is a picture of the school. My classmates are graduates in the picture.



Sonia's school building. This picture was taken in Heraklion, Crete, Greece in 1954.

Then I went to what is called the Business School, which is really a regular junior/senior high. This was my school ID. It was inside this building

in the picture, which used to be a Church of Our Savior. Then it became a mosque. Everything became a mosque in those days, when the Muslims were there. Then, eventually, when I was a kid, it was a school. On the lower floor would be our business school. The other two or three stories would be used by a girls' school, which was also like a gymnasium, or what we call today? Not middle school, but junior/senior high.

Unfortunately it became an eyesore, because nobody took care of it when, back in 1959, our school moved away. It had some damage from some of the earthquakes, but it survived a few centuries. It could have been restored, but no. They tore it down and made an open little park and put some sculptures and opened some roads, because there's a lot of traffic there now.

Everything changes. Of course, I was a little surprised when I discovered that it was gone. (laughs) I didn't have Internet then, to know what was going on.

Esarey: You didn't see that one coming. (laughs)

Lang: No. I went there for five years. After my junior year, I did get a scholarship to come to the States. So, I graduated in America.

Esarey: I will come back to that particular period of time, and we'll pick up just a little bit more about some of the childhood things. You mentioned that many of the buildings were occupied by the Turks. What happened?

Lang: Well, the churches were occupied and became mosques. I'm sure, like every invader, when they find a nice big house, it was for the captain.

Esarey: When did that happen?

Lang: Heraklion was under siege for almost twenty years, the longest siege in history.

Esarey: What years were those?

Lang: I'm trying to recall at the moment. It was in the 1600's.

Esarey: Oh, that was a long, long time ago.

Lang: But yes, when it fell, it was in 1668.

Esarey: So, it wasn't in the recent years.

Lang: No, no.

Esarey: I understand now. For some reason, I was thinking it was something that happened after the 1940's.

Lang: Oh no. After the 1940's, we had a civil war.

Esarey: If you were to describe your early years as a child, how would you describe them?

Lang: Well, in spite of everything, we were loved and well-protected and guided. It was really like what somebody said, "It takes a village." Well, over there, it was natural. Everybody watched after you, even if Mother would send me to take something to her sister across town, and I was only seven or eight years old. I would go across town, and nobody would bother me, except one night.



Sonia's family

I was probably at the library, coming home kind of late, because I could not take books home, and a general was worried about me going home safely. I guess the library closed about 7:00 or 8:00. It was winter time and closed early. So, he actually took me by the hand and took me home and gave my parents quite a lecture. "You shouldn't let your little girl be out on the street this late."

But it was nice. We played simple games. We did not fight over toys. We did not have any toys. As a matter of fact, I was making dolls for the orphans, and I did not have a doll for myself. The boys occupied themselves with this and that. They'd find a little ball or even a bunch of rocks tied together and kick it around, and they were happy. We were happy with simple things. We did not demand what the kids demand today, and they're never happy.

Esarey: Well, you're talking about the mid-1940's to the mid-1950's, then.

Lang: In the '50s, you know, just to go for a walk or a stroll and sit at an outdoor café with your friends was nice and especially at the square. It was called, *Eleftherias*, which is Liberty Square. There was this nice little kiosk, made out of marble and beautiful columns. The seated band, with their shiny golden helmets, would play, all dressed in white. We were little kids, who could go around the beautiful park and walk and play, and mom and dad can just relax. They knew we were safe.

Esarey: It was a village.

Lang: Yes, it was simple. Today, every time I go to Greece, everybody seems to be using the English word "stress."

Esarey: And you didn't feel stress?

Lang: No, I didn't know what I did not have, so I did not miss anything. I did not have any advertisements about anything. I was glad to have a new outfit for Easter and a couple of new outfits for the summer and for fall, because my body changed constantly. I was very glad to finally have my Mary-Jane shoes and not my brother's hand-me-down shoes, with shoe laces. I was happy to go to the village, especially not Astrokoi, but the adjacent village, called Varvaroi, because a lot of my father's brothers were there.



A family picture taken December 28, 1947, at Grandfather Emmanuel's orchard in Astrakoi, Crete. Sonia is seated second from left.

Esarey: So, your uncles lived in the area.

Lang: Yes, and sisters.

Esarey: What were your family gatherings like?

Lang: It was very simple. We'd have a bite to eat. The meat was only for Sundays, anyway, so you'd have a pot roast of some sort. We'd sit around there, enjoy the food, with a little salad and some bread and drink wine. The kids could have just two drops of wine in a glass of water. We had a lot of conversation. They would talk into the night. We kids would occupy ourselves with little games, like tic-tac-toe or whatever, and we would listen to the stories as we dozed off.

I heard a lot of stories like I never heard before. There were a lot of stories about the early days of Crete. As a child, I wasn't familiar that Crete was under water at one time and the fact that there were actually all kinds of sea shells around on the mountain, just embedded into the rocks. I remember sleeping with one eye and listening (chuckle). It was that fascinating. Quite often, if we were visiting somewhere, my father had to carry me over his shoulder, back home, because we didn't have many buses in those days.

Esarey: You would walk.

Lang: We would walk everywhere, and we never had a waistline problem. Everybody kept his figure and was healthy, since we ate meat once a week and fish twice, on Wednesdays and Fridays, lots of vegetables, and our dessert was always fruit, not extra starches, like sugars and stuff. We had no heart problems.

Esarey: It was a simple. Did you have a doctor or health facility?

Lang: Well, I was always anemic, because Mother thought I could eat French fries or simple things, whatever. As long as I was eating, she thought I was fine. But, of course, I was not eating the variety that I needed, as a growing child. I remember those terrible, terrible shots of iron, et cetera, straining to my veins.

There was a doctor around the corner. Actually, he had an office in his house. He was very nice. I remember he was rather plump. Apparently, he was making more money than we did because, unless you were plump, you were poor. He would just give my mother a little lecture. "She has to eat more meat." "But she hates lamb, and she won't eat it." "Well, get her some chicken." Of course, we lived in the city, and chickens were rare. So, my relatives would bring us live chickens, so Mother can twist their neck and take care of them. She made sure I wasn't there when she was doing that. I would be in school. Otherwise, I wouldn't touch the meat.

Dad would go to a café, near the fish stores. That café was where the hunters would meet for coffee. He would say, "Did you bring me anything for little Sonia?" And the hunters would bring him some game. Or, he would go straight to the port, looking for fresh fish. Anything so little Sonia wouldn't be sick, and I was sick a lot.

My brother always was sick too. I remember he almost died of pneumonia, and he developed a croup. He had all kinds of lung problems. Of course, we didn't have the medicines that we have today, not even penicillin. Mother used to take something that was called tincture. It was the whey from the wheat. She would put it in some old type pillow case and sew it up. She would warm it up first, in the skillet, stuff it in the pillow case and sew it up, so she wouldn't have any pins in there, and put it directly on our chests.

All kinds of strange things happened. One time, Dad took me to the port. They were rebuilding the port. It had been damaged during the war, and they were also reinforcing the breakers, with dumping all kinds of big rocks back there. Well, I stepped between the blocks of cement, caught my foot there. I started bleeding at the heel. One of the workmen stopped, picked me up and put me at the back of this long, flat-bed that was pulled by a mule or a horse. He removed a cigarette from his package, tore it apart and stuffed my wound with tobacco. That stopped the bleeding, until we got home. They made sure that I didn't walk, and Dad didn't want to carry me that far. So, they gave us both a ride back.

Esarey: You never forgot that one.

Lang: No, I was so cute. I looked like Shirley Temple. They just couldn't resist those long curls. Blond hair was rather rare in those days.

Esarey: Do we have a picture of you?

Lang: Oh yes, it's right here.

Esarey: You actually do look like Shirley Temple.

Lang: I was born blond, and my children were also born very blond. Eventually they did turn brownish.

Esarey: You were a very cute little girl.

Lang: Thank you. (laughs) Mother remembers me going to the movies one time, and she had no material to make me a new dress. So, she took one of her beautiful shawls that had shiny little stars in it and made a dress for me. I must have been four or five years old, and, during intermission, I stood up on the chair or the seat to look around at what was going on. Mother said, "Everybody was pointing at Sonia, because she was so cute in that dress." (laughs)



Sonia standing near St. Titus and ruins in her Brownie uniform. August 25, 1952.

Esarey: Do you think you received any particular gift from one parent or the other? You said your mom was—

Lang: She was very elegant, and she liked her house to be beautiful. She loved to read, and she liked to write, not that anything survived of her writings, unfortunately.

Father had the background of a farmer, but he would listen to the stories that she would read him daily, when they were relaxing. He loved her dearly. She was always so beautiful, compared to the girls back home that covered their heads with scarves, you know.

Esarey: And he was proud.

Lang: He was very proud. She would take his arm, and he would put his arms behind his back. She would be just holding on to him and be promenading. By that time, they both had a little plumpness. They were doing much better business-wise, so they were having their good days and their bad days.

Esarey: You have good memories.

Lang: Oh yes. I was dearly loved by them and everybody at the village, villages I should say. I still keep in touch with people in the villages, by phone or visit them.

Esarey: Both of your parents are now deceased.

Lang: Deceased. Father died in '75, and Mother in '77.

Esarey: This would have been after you had come to the United States.

Lang: Oh yes, I was here permanently, as a citizen. We lived in Oklahoma at the time. No, Father died when we lived in Oklahoma, and Mother died when we lived in New Mexico.

But they came to visit us in Oklahoma, believe it or not. They had never been on a plane before. I had written them little cards in English and in Greek, such as, "My name is so-and-so. I'm going to Oklahoma City. My daughter's name is Sonia. Her phone number is... Please call collect." "I'm lost" or, you know, "I'm thirsty; I'm hungry. Where is the bathroom?" I forgot to tell them how to flush, but they survived all kinds of things

I was told Mother needed some milk for her stomach, but I had not written the word "milk." She tried to explain to the lady. She said, "I need gala." The stewardess looked back at her. Finally Mother put her hands on her breasts and was pretending milking a goat or something. Oh, they knew what she wanted. So, sign language comes in handy.

Esarey: (both laugh) Sign language works. What was your brother doing? Did he come here?

Lang: Well, he went to the same school with me. No, he was married at the time, and he was working as a bookkeeper for a local hotel.

Esarey: His name was George?

Lang: George, yes.

Esarey: I have several Georges to keep track of here.

Lang: Oh yes, there was Grandfather George. Of course, that was my grandfather from my mother's side of the family. I understand that my father's father had a father named George. So, he has a brother called George. And, of course, they had kids, and the kids had kids, and the kids' names were George. So, many of them, yes. When I did my family tree, you can see what I mean.

Esarey: Well, I appreciate having what you've given me, because I thought, "Oh, oh, there're a few Georges here.

Lang: Plus, I married a George.

Esarey: Yes, you married a man named George, and what's your son's name?

Lang: Well, Junior, of course. (both laugh) We ran out of names.

Esarey: Where is he now? What is he doing?

Lang: My brother?

Esarey: Your brother.

Lang: Why, he's retired. They have a nice son. His name is John, like my father or *Ioannis*.

Esarey: And they live where?

Lang: In Heraklion.

Esarey: Do you visit?

Lang: Oh, of course. I was there three years ago, and my sister-in-law, Stella, is such a good cook. Oh, I could have stayed there forever. (laughs)

Back in 2004, when they were doing their Olympics, my husband loved all the food and the Greek customs. Before you can sit down, they bring you food. You don't want to hurt their feelings, so you eat this, and you eat that. They put the food on your plate; you don't. By the time we left, after two weeks, he had gained seventeen pounds.

Esarey: (Laughs) He wasn't impolite though.

Lang: Oh no, no.

Esarey: He wouldn't hurt their feelings.

Lang: No, no.

Esarey: Did you speak more than one language?

Lang: Well, we had to study ancient Greek, which was part of our heritage. Of course, even we read Greek history by Thoukididis.

Esarey: What is that?

Lang: Thoukididis was the ancient Greek author who wrote the story of how the Greeks of Alexander's time came back to Greece and how excited they were to finally see the sea. It's also the language of our church. Our services in church are still conducted in ancient Greek, unless you're in the States, where there is a combination of ancient Greek and English. We also studied French and English.

Esarey: Okay.

Lang: We had tutors that had their own little language school that you could go, after hours, and improve on your English and your French. It was that tutor of mine that actually said, "Sonia, you're doing such a good job with your English, maybe you can apply for the scholarship."

Esarey: I was just wondering if you already had a leg-up when you came to the United States.

Lang: Yes, it was a plus for her, too, that one of her students received a scholarship. But, trying to come to the States was not easy, because my parents were afraid to leave me all by myself. They sheltered me during all those years.

Esarey: We'll just move right on. I would like to go back. I want to hear exactly how that scholarship happened.

Did your family take vacations? Did you go to travel at all?

Lang: Well, every single day in our calendar is a saint's day, and then, every village, every town has a patron saint, every monastery. So, when it was Saint George's Day, you had choices of about a hundred churches or villages that had a Saint George. They would have a fiesta or a feast. People would come, and they would eat and dance after the services. It was lots of fun.

Esarey: So, you had them right there.

Lang: Yes. So, we went to many places, many monasteries and Sundays, if possible. If there was a special celebration, Father would make a point to take us there. It was to get away from the city, which was noisy and dusty. My brother wasn't too excited, but I was. I just loved it. I loved the outdoors and the church bells ringing. Nah, he wanted to be with his friends and look for the girls or whatever boys did in those days. But he came along. He didn't have a choice. Sometimes, when he was a little older, we would just leave him behind. I didn't care.

He was surprised at my last visit, when we went to a Cretan wedding. They were singing Cretan songs from the early days, when my father was a warrior, and I knew the words. He said, "How do you know?" "Oh," I said,

“records that I brought over from Greece.” He was shocked that I could repeat the words.

Esarey: He didn't know them?

Lang: Because I would listen to them over and over again, just to feel the pride and knowledge I carried with me all those years.

Esarey: That's amazing. That's an amazing story. That's wonderful. Religion played a pretty large role in family day-to-day life.

Lang: Every single Sunday we went to church. That was a must. On the way to church, Mother would have a round pan, like a baking dish, and take it to the bakers.

Esarey: Is it the Hellenic... what was this picture called?

Lang: Oh, it's called Hellenic Orthodox church.

Esarey: And that was in Greece, as well.

Lang: Yes, we had our little routine. One Sunday we would go to the cathedral. The other we would go to St. Titus, unless there was, of course, another special event. Mother would leave our lunch with the baker, to bake it for us. It would be meat and potatoes, with a little olive oil or butter, if she could afford the butter. But the meat had enough fat on it by itself.

We would go, after church, for ice-cream or a little pastry. On the way home, Dad would buy a salad from a little boy that was selling on the street. It would be just some leaf lettuce, strung together with fresh parsley and fresh dill and a couple or three green onions. So, all you had to do was take it home and chop it up, with a little olive oil and a little vinegar and a little salt, and you had a salad. You had food, plus fresh bread.

Then it was siesta time. And, of course, afternoon was for the movies. Dad was nice enough to take us to the movies. They would be either American or European, mostly American in those days. But they would start with a journal, which would be a documentary. We saw what was happening around the world, what was happening in Korea, because a lot of our soldiers were there too. I eventually did get to see the wall being built in Berlin, but that was back in 1960. You kept up with the news that way.

We thought your President Eisenhower was such a nice looking, mature gentleman. After all, he helped liberate Europe, and the Marshall Plan had helped rebuild Greece. We were very grateful to that. By that time then, slowly, surely we did have an air force base built in the hometown.

Esarey: What's the name of that base?

Lang: Just American air force base, and the place was near a village called Gournes, or *Yournes*, in Greek.

Esarey: Are we at about 1960-ish when you are seventeen or eighteen years old?

Lang: Eighteen, yes.

Esarey: Could you describe the political climate in your country, just about that time?

Lang: It was still very shaky, because it was taking a long time to recover. People could not understand what was happening. The people in the villages had one radio at the café and one newspaper to share. They couldn't afford anything else. Most of the villages were still without electricity. Some had running water, but not in the home. They had a common running water area.

When I came back from America and went to the village for celebrations of the Holy Spirit, everybody had some questions about America and the political situation here. They wanted to know if Communism was the answer to our problems. I was trying to explain to them that, yes, that's a great idea. We'll all be equally poor and equally serfs. The rest of them will still control us and have all the money. We're not going to have any electricity either. We're lucky to even have a radio, and there will be a station that the government will control. They were surprised and had so many questions. Everybody started moving their chairs closer and closer. The music stopped, and they gave me the mike. (laughs)

Esarey: (laughs) How old were you when that happened?

Lang: Eighteen.

Esarey: You were eighteen, and you had finished high school here.

Lang: High school here.

Esarey: Let's talk about that scholarship opportunity. How did you get that?

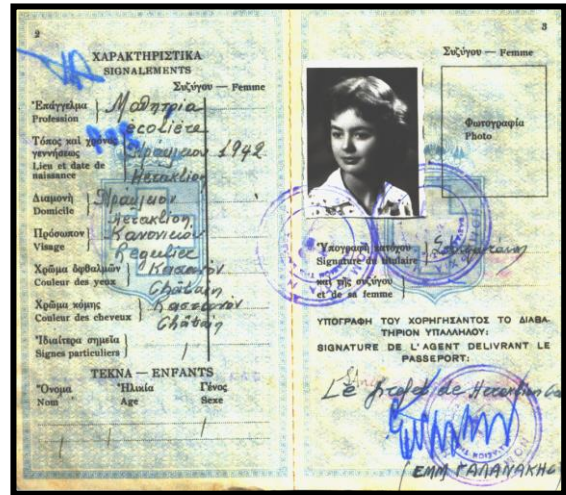
Lang: Well, as I said, my teacher, who was also the teacher of English at the high school, was very proud of me and wanted me to do something better. After my parents were convinced, I thought it would be good for me to have such an opportunity. I applied for it.

Esarey: What was it called?

Lang: American Field Service.

Esarey: Oh, the American Field Service, yes, of course.

Lang: It's an exchange program. I had to go through the routine, of course, and get a passport and all the paperwork that I still have downstairs in an album, saved by Mrs. Root. That's the lady I stayed with, Mr. and Mrs. Root, Mabel and Glenn. She kept even the letters I sent her to introduce myself, and boy, do I have misspellings. I didn't have Microsoft Word in those days, but even then, I could make a mistake. (laughs)



Seventeen year old, Aspasia's (Sonia's) passport written in French and Greek.

Esarey: And you came over here how? You know, how did you make the actual trip? Was it by plane?

Lang: Yes, I went by boat to Athens and went to the embassy and finalized everything and boarded a plane, with a lot of other students. Some of them came from Turkey; some of them from Greece. We were up, up in the air. For the first time in my life, I realized I was up in the air, and it didn't scare me at all. I was sitting with this Turkish boy, and I didn't look at him as an enemy at all.

Esarey: You were both on an adventure.

Lang: On an adventure, and we were just chit-chatting, anxious to go to America. It was quite a trip.

Esarey: Quite a trip. What convinced your parents to let you go?

Lang: My father had an account at a bank. Sometimes it would be a loan. Sometimes he deposited money that he didn't want to keep at home, and he could not leave the store to do it. He would be in the back of the store, because he had some equipment to card wool for the public. Mother was up in the front of the store to keep an eye on things. My brother was doing something else, either at school or busy with something, because schools were either in the morning or afternoons. I had the afternoon school as a small child.

So, my father would put some money in a little brown bag and send me to the bank. Well, nobody would stop me. They said, "Hi, Sonia, I saved you some candy," and that sort of thing. I stopped and said hello to

everybody. I always had candy and chocolates and was putting that little Shirley Temple smile on them. I would go to the bank. There was a banker there that was in charge of the bank. He always thought I was so sweet, and he would take the money and says, "Okay, here's your receipt. Make sure Daddy gets it."

One time, he had something on his desk, and I said "What is that?" He says, "It's a pocket calendar." I said, "What is a pocket calendar?" He opened it and showed it to me. "Oh, it's so pretty." He says, "Okay, you can have it." So, I had my first leather-bound pocket calendar. Every year he saved me one. He respected Dad. As I was growing up, I was a good student. He talked to my father. He was an educated person.

I think we were at the bank together for something, and I said, "By the way, Dad, why don't you ask him about letting me go to America? He knows a lot of things." They chit-chatted, and he says, "Mr. Anyfantakis, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. She'll see new worlds. She'll discover new things. She will learn so much. It will be better than going to a university." He was right. It was a wonderland.

Esarey: Where did you live?

Lang: I lived in Blue Earth, Minnesota.

Esarey: Okay, tell me about Blue Earth, Minnesota. What a different world that must have been.

Lang: It was about four or five thousand people.

Esarey: Where is that?

Lang: It's in the southern part, near Mankato, closer to Iowa.

Esarey: Okay, southern Minnesota.

Lang: Yeah, their main industry was corn and a Green Giant factory. All the boys and girls made money by detasseling corn and working in the factory. I arrived there the first week in August of 1959.

A few months before I arrived, unfortunately, the Root's second or youngest daughter had died of an aneurysm or something like that. If I remember the name correctly, it was Mary Helen. Of course, I never got to meet her. She was a beautiful girl, from her pictures. Their hearts were broken. They almost canceled the year with the foreign student, but I was the medicine they needed. By the time they showed me their world, they forgot some of their pain. I took her place for the rest of their lives. I've known them longer than I've known my own parents, yes. And now their daughter lives in Delaware.



Sonia with her American "parents," Mable and Glenn Root.

Esarey: You're still in contact?

Lang: I'm still in contact. I used to actually go to Minnesota as often as I could, depending on where we were. The Roots would stop at our house, along the way, going to Florida. They've even been to this house. At the time, we had a water bed. They didn't like the water bed, but they liked everything else. (chuckles)

Esarey: Water bed. (chuckles)

Lang: They got to see my granddaughter, and I went to the nursing home where they were. I went to Glenn's funeral with George. We got stuck in the snow on the way back. About a month or so after his funeral, their grandson (because they only had the one daughter) suddenly died. I knew she was all alone in the nursing home, so I took time off from whatever I was doing and drove there and stayed with her that weekend, because I didn't want her to be alone during the day of the funeral. Of course, by that time, everybody said, "Oh hi, Sonia." "Do you remember my exchange student, Sonia?" She was showing me off to her friends and at church, which is a Methodist church. She forgot some of the pain a little bit.

Esarey: You were there for her.

Lang: Oh, yeah. We loved each other like real parents and daughter. While they were in the nursing home, I called them every Sunday. I could hear her saying, "Hey, Glenn, pick up the extension. It's Sonia."

Esarey: Where were you living? This is as you moved around?

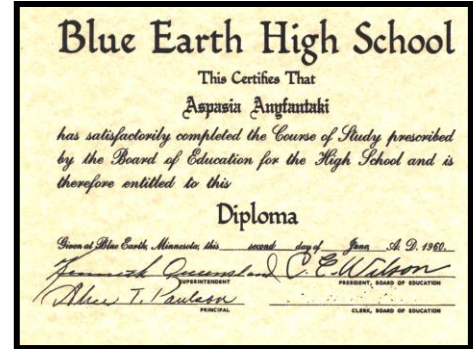
Lang: Well, yes. Since they went to a nursing home, we lived right here in Springfield. So, it was easier to drive up there. It only took eight hours.

Esarey: After you spent your year there, you went back to Greece to finish one more year, correct? Or was this your senior year?

Lang: I never got the chance. That was my senior year.

Esarey: And then what happened?

Lang: Well, when I was there, I was a good ambassador from the States, because people were asking me about this country.



Esarey: And this is you sitting with the mike talking.

Sonia's American diploma had a Greek translation.

Lang: Not just the mike, any place, every time, everywhere I went. Of course, I always had the best memories about the kindness of people. In some ways, I found the people here unsophisticated, in the sense that they didn't worry too much about international politics, like the Greeks, who were pounding their fists on the table every day, because this happened in America or this happened in France. I just liked that simplicity of life and the warmth.

There was a lot of warmth in the Root family. I remembered the grandma, Heidi. Of course, I used to call them Mom and Dad. Everybody had adopted me, the whole city. I wasn't used to those things. I saw traffic lights here. I saw roller skating. I participated in all kinds of sports. I did this; I did that. Everybody was so excited. And for Christmas, there were tons of little packages under the tree for me, a bracelet there, earrings there—

Esarey: Were they Scandinavian?

Lang: Swedish. When I took all those wonderful little trinkets home, I shared them with all my first cousins, who were so excited. Of course, I didn't have much money of my own, to have something from America. It was just nice. Then I heard, through a friend, that they needed someone at the village of Kastelli, who could teach grades seven through twelve.

Esarey: So, you became a teacher?

Lang: Just basic English, the alphabet and how to read and write, nothing too special.

Esarey: And you were what, nineteen?

Lang: I was eighteen at the time. What they did was not through the regular system. Every student paid five or ten dollars a month into the kitty, and I was paid through that. I was making more money than the poor teachers were making, who had a college degree. That was another fascinating experience.

Esarey: How old were these children?

Lang: The children? Twelve to eighteen. Some of them could have been older than me because, you know, if you do not pass your grade, you stay behind. Because I was fresh out of school, I needed to keep an eye on them because I knew all the tricks of the trade.

Esarey: You had the presence.

Lang: Well, plus what happened during my hours. Sometimes I'd have forty, fifty, sixty kids in the classroom. Some of them would actually sit on the floor with their notebooks, because they had to squeeze me into their schedule.

Esarey: You were teaching basic English.

Lang: And, of course, I taught them a lot of good things about America. Sometimes they just wanted to talk about America. Everybody wanted to go to America.

Esarey: Why, do you think?

Lang: Well, more business, generally. You know, opportunities. Because, when you live on an island and about 60% of it is nothing but rock and mountains, and the rest of it you can grow your food on, you get your little house just on the most barren spot, one house on top of the other house. Yes, they all want to go to America.

Don't forget those Greek-Americans. When they come back home, they want to show off that they've got money, even if they didn't make it here, even if they washed dishes all their lives. They go back home, bearing gifts for everybody. So, the Greeks assume everybody has money in America. What do you see in the movies? You'd see those lovely gowns they used to wear, in those days in the forties and the fifties, and those sophisticated people, with their servants, and the Texas millionaires. You think everybody's a millionaire.

Esarey: You were able to tell the children about what everyday life was like for people.

Lang: Yes, I told them how the kids worked, delivering newspapers door-to-door, in the cold and the snow. By the way, that was my first experience with snow. I

had never seen snow before. I'll tell you more about it later, when we discuss more about the year in Blue Earth. There are just a lot and a lot of stories.

Esarey: You know, when you came back, there was this period of time, at some point in here, that you met George.

Lang: George. Well, it was after the school year was over with. I found it rather stressful, and I told them I wasn't interested in next year. I decided to go and study German because I thought, well, the more languages, the better. After all, the tourists were coming now on a regular basis.

I tried to get a job as a typist on base. Now, I had taken a semester of typing in high school in America, with a real typewriter. In my business school in Crete, we didn't have any typewriters. We practiced on a drawing of a typewriter. We had to cut little circles and glue them on a little board. We practiced on a piece of paper. So, I was not fast enough, which is good, because I would not have met George. Maybe I would have, if I worked there. Who knows?

Esarey: We don't know.

Lang: I was trying to find some job that had to do with tourism. So, when I was studying German, my teacher was German-American. He was military, and he was picking up some extra money in town by teaching German. One night, when I was going home, he caught up with me. He said, "Well, Sonia, isn't this a lovely evening?" And I said, "Yes." So, we talked together all the way up the street. He was going toward the square to take the bus back to the base.

Esarey: He was in the Army, Air Force?

Lang: In the Air Force. I asked him, "How do you like Greece? Have you ever been to a Greek home?" And he said, "No."

Esarey: How old was George?

Lang: Well, George was twenty-three, but that wasn't George. That was my teacher.

Esarey: Oh, I'm sorry.

Lang: I hadn't met George yet.

Esarey: You hadn't met George. This was someone else.

Lang: This was Fred, the teacher. I was thinking, gee, we just got a new table and new chairs for the dining room, time to use it. "How about coming this

weekend and have a Greek dinner with us?" That was not the Greek way, but I was too American in some ways already.

Esarey: (laughs)

Lang: I go home and say, "Mom, Dad, we're going to use this new table. Remember, I said, "we needed a new table for your future son-in-law." They said, "Don't tell me." I said, "No, no, he's not your future son-in-law. I'm bringing my teacher over, because he has never been to a Greek house. He has never tasted Greek hospitality."

So, they said, "Okay. He's a German?" And I said, "Yes, Dad, but he's okay." By that time, we had German tourists anyway. He came that Saturday and had dinner with us, or was it Sunday? I don't remember exactly. Mother was busy with the dishes and said, "Just take him out to the balcony, so you guys can have some fresh air and chit-chat." I was telling him about America, and I was showing him my pictures from America. I said, "Oh, see this? This is the school I want to go back to, if I could. It's called Ball State."

Esarey: Oh, you already had it figured out.

Lang: Yes, and that was in Muncie, Indiana. He said, "Ball State? My best friend on base went to that school. I'll bring him over sometime."

Esarey: Ooh.

Lang: So, the following weekend it happened. George was free because. On weekends he used to work at the TV and radio station there to pick up extra money. So, they both rode the motorcycle. It was lunch time. I was getting ready to go down to the store and give Dad a break, so he could come upstairs and eat. The doorbell rang, and there they were at the door. I said, "Oh, hi, wait a minute. I'm coming down."

So, we sat at the store for a while and chit-chatted. Of course, he introduced me, "This is my friend George. He's also from the base, and he's a pharmacist there. By the way, what are you doing tonight?" says Fred. I said, "Why?" He said, "Well there's a dance on base, and I would like to invite you over there. George will be there too, and we can just have a little fun. Have a Coca-Cola, whatever." "Coke? Wow, I haven't had one in a long time."

Esarey: (laughs) For the Coke.

Lang: It was for the Coke. Of course, I was anxious to go. I forgot the Greek customs. You don't go to strange places, un-escorted, without your parents.

Esarey: You were already part American.

Lang: I was part American, yes. I was always breaking the rules anyway. I thought I was starting a new trend. So, I had already started a trend before I met George. I went to the movies with a guy that my parents allowed me to go to the movies with.

Esarey: Alone, without a chaperone?

Lang: Without a chaperone. So I said, "Look Mom and Dad, if I go to the movies with a man, we see a movie. If he reaches over, I just slap his hand. But if we have to hide from Mom and Dad and everybody else, he was going to reach for more."

Esarey: (laughs.)

Lang: So, I had explained the situation. They said, "Okay, but what are other people going to say?" "Mom and Dad, they're going to say that I was in America having fifteen children. Don't worry about it." So, when I met George, I was staring at him. I was staring at Fred, and I was thinking "Umm, Coca-Cola and music, alright!"

Esarey: Laughs. Coca-Cola and music!

Lang: Oh, who cares? I had seen enough churches for the time being, with Dad, and what happened? Dad comes down, and I said, "Dad, guess what? There's a dance tonight." He says, "Where?" I said, "At the base." He says, "So what?" I said, "I want to go." We're talking in Greek, of course. "Are you crazy? What are people going to say?" "They're going to say the same thing they said when I went to America, that I had fifteen children in one year."

Esarey: (laughs.)

Lang: "And besides," I said, "I have two chaperones. They're going to check on each other. I'm going to go on the bus, by myself, and I'm going to come back on the same bus, by myself." "But what are the people going to say?" I said, "Dad, you want me to be happy? I'm going to go there and have a Coca-Cola and a little fun." He said, "What is a Coca-Cola?" The guys recognize the words Coca-Cola. I said, "It's almost like a Greek soda, only it's kind of a rich color, and it tastes good." He said, "Let me ask your mother."

So, he disappears. He goes upstairs to ask my mother. Of course, my mother always says, "No way, Jose." So, she comes downstairs, and she met George. "They look okay, and we know Fred is okay. If they keep an eye on each other, I'll let you. But, be very careful and come back on time. I don't want you out past midnight." I said, "Mother, the buses don't run that late anyway. The bus will bring me back home."

So, I went, and I wore my beautiful red dress that I wore at Nancy's party. I wore it at Nancy's wedding party. I was actually one of her bridesmaids in America. There are a lot of stories about Blue Earth. So, here I get off the bus in my pretty red dress and my high-heels and my hair fixed up, and I go to the NCO (non-commissioned officers club). I think they had a little band playing. I look around, and there's nothing but men and maybe two or three girls. I said, "Oopsy, what do I do now?"

Esarey: (laughs.)

Lang: So, the guys met me at the bus and escorted me there. We sat down, and the music started playing. Fred said, "Would you like to dance?" I said, "Sure." So we danced, and then I sat down. I haven't had a chance to catch my breath, and a stranger comes by and says, "Do you want to dance?"

Esarey: Oh, and you're one of the only women!

Lang: I said, "I'm sorry, I've already promised." But I didn't want to look at Fred because, after all, he was my teacher, although he was the same age as George. So, I looked at George, and George, of course, started dancing. We never stopped. Every time somebody came to the table, sometimes I looked at Fred, but most of the time I looked at George. Pretty soon, George was singing in my ear, "When you're feeling blue, all your dreams will come true." You know that song and "Yellow Bird?"

Esarey: You remember this. Your recall is amazing.

Lang: Oh, I remember almost every song and every sound. It was amazing. I had a wonderful time with George. Poor Fred, he says, "You know, guys, you have to excuse me. I have to go and finish writing some letters." He gave up on me.

Esarey: (chuckles) He gave up.

Lang: So, the time came, and George says, "Sonia, I have to take you to the bus, so you won't miss it." He put me on the bus and said, "I'm sorry I can't be there to take you home." I said, "Don't worry. It stops at Liberty Square. It's well-lit; it's only a few blocks to my house, and it's lit all the way." And, as I said, people still kept an eye, if nothing else but to gossip.

Esarey: Yep, yep.

Lang: At my age, it was not to protect me, it was to gossip about me, especially my red dress. "What is she doing at this hour by herself? Where is her brother? Oh, he is probably with a girl."

Esarey: (laughs.)

Lang: Well, you know, the hormones were flowing anyway, and you're young. On the way to Heraklion, I was day-dreaming about George. I was looking out the window, with the black sea [it was night]. Of course, there was nothing but a cliff on both sides. The beautiful sea, the waves just breaking, and the road was just a big s-curve, all the way. We were lucky to squeeze two buses side-by-side, and there were no lights, other than from the old buses. But we made it into town alright, and I was recalling the songs I heard. I was in a happy mood. I really had a good time and lots of Coca-cola. I get out of the bus, and there's George waiting for me.

Esarey: How'd he do that?

Lang: Well, I didn't ask him. He said, "I came to escort you." How did I know? Maybe he borrowed a car. Who knows what? So, he did escort me home and said his goodnights. Of course, Mom and Dad were at the balcony, waving at me to make sure he didn't kiss me or anything. So, we shook hands, and he went back. Of course, he came to visit us again, at the store to show Dad some pictures of America...any excuse to come to the store.

Esarey: To see you.

Lang: Some years later, when we were telling this story, like I'm telling you this story, he filled in the gaps. He said, "Oh yes, I was there. I borrowed Fred's motorcycle, and I followed those red tail lights of the bus." He didn't know how to turn on the motorcycle headlights. Then he said, "On the way back, I followed a Greek something with tail lights."

Esarey: (both laugh) He took his life in his hands.

Lang: Oh, we were both...smitten is the word, right?

Esarey: So exciting.

Lang: Exciting. Then one night, when I went to my class, I had gotten a message through my teacher, "George is going to meet you, but he wants to ask you something." So, I was taking a shortcut. I went past the cathedral, and I went in there, lit a candle and asked God, "God, if you think George is the man for me, bless us both." That's all I asked. I got to class, and, of course, during class, Fred was looking at me. I was looking at the ceiling. I couldn't wait for the class to be over with, so I could talk to George. We knew each other for about ten days then.

Esarey: You were smitten.

Lang: When Fred went by, he said something in English to me, like, “Lots of stars in the sky tonight.”

Esarey: (laughs)

Lang: So, when class was over and when George and I were alone, he wanted to know if I would go steady with him. I said, “Steady? We don’t even date in this country. We go straight from our parents’ hearth to our husband’s home.”

Esarey: Oh.

Lang: He says, “Will you marry me then?” “Thank you, St. Minas,” I was thinking. But he says, “The reason I’m asking, and I’m not waiting to formally get to know each other and all that, is because my time on Crete is expiring in December.” This is already September, when we met. So, he had a few months left. He could not extend his stay. At least he was honest, because other guys did the same thing, proposed marriage, slept with the girls, and then disappeared.

So, I said, “I cannot say what I feel about you. I cannot say yes, and I cannot say no, because we have old traditions that I must respect. I have to talk to my parents. We will see what happens. If you don’t hear from me, within a couple of days, please forget all about me. That way, neither of us will be hurt.”

When I left for home, with my luck, Mother was waiting for me outside. She could smell those things far away, what I was up to. When we went home, I said, “Mother, don’t have the wrong impression. George is very honorable. He even asked to marry me.” “What?” So, we had a big discussion about being married and leaving my beloved parents behind. I said, “I’m in love. I don’t want to marry that doctor. He’s twenty years older than me.” In those days all marriages were arranged. I always dreamed with dreamy eyes, since I was a kid. In the movies, all those romances and all the books I read and all the escapades of other people, so, no, I was going to live my life the way I dreamed it and explore the world and whatever, which I did.

Esarey: Which you have, yes.

Lang: Then, I was thinking, if I married a foreigner, I could explore the world, because, if I married a rich Greek, I would explore it even more. But no, I didn’t want a stranger to be my husband. I wanted somebody that I loved. “But what if he doesn’t have money?” I said, “Of course, I don’t care if he doesn’t have money. He has a job. We’ll make do.” “Well, how are you going to take your dowry away?” I said “I’m going to take a couple of suitcases. That’ll be enough. We can manage somehow,” which, of course, was very hard at first.

Esarey: We will talk about that, I think, next time.

Lang: So, I had to twist their arms in a sense. I think my brother was in the military, doing his two year tour of duty, like everybody else. I said, "If I don't marry George, I will never, ever, ever marry anybody." I was so stubborn, and they knew it. Not only that, but then, the people were convinced that I had fourteen kids in America. That's why nobody wanted to marry me.

Esarey: (laughs)

Lang: They liked George and thought he was such a neat guy, always. He didn't wear blue jeans, like some of the other GIs, and always wore a white shirt, nicely pressed. He had a sweet smile, and, even if he didn't understand the language, his eyes were just smiling, but not at them. I think they were smiling at me.

Esarey: What year was this, 1960?

Lang: Nineteen sixty-one, September, '61. It must have been around the thirteenth or so.

Esarey: Excuse me for interrupting, before we talk about your actual marriage. I would like to do that at our next meeting, because that is a whole story in itself.

Lang: There's four pages of it in here, my Greek wedding.

Esarey: I think this will a good time to stop and then pick up this wonderful story about how you got married and what you did next, in coming to America. Does that sound good?

Lang: Okay, sounds good for me, too.

Esarey: Thank you, we'll do that then.

(End of interview session #1)

An Interview with Sonia Lang

IM-A-L-2010-049.02

Interview # 2: November 17, 2010

Interviewer: Carol Esarey

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Esarey: This is the second interview with Sonia Lang. The title of this series is *Immigrants' Stories*. My name is Carol Esarey, and I'm an interviewer with the Oral History Program at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. The date is November 17, 2010, and we are in Sonia's home. When we finished our first interview, we were just about at 1961 or so. We were planning to talk today, starting with your marriage plans with George and forward from there. I think that was where we were going to pick up. Does that sound about right?

Lang: That sounds okay.

Esarey: Good. Just so we know, for the record, for the translation Sonia has prepared a beautiful book of pictures and written documentation. Some of it we will very likely read right into the record. It's a way for us to go through the interview and look at pictures and describe what's going on, as well, as we talk about these different things. So, I just wanted that to be noted, because I can take most of these pictures with me, and we'll be able to use them as a pictorial record of what is going on. Okay, if we could, go back just a little bit and just describe in general what the political climate was like in Crete in the early 1960's. Then we'll move into the more personal discussion. I just want to get a feel again for what was going on in the country.

Lang: Well, things were rather quiet. Greece was recovering after the Second World War. It had taken a long time, of course, to progress in many ways, to fix the infrastructure. On Crete things were quiet. It was just an idyllic spot for tourists. It was clean air, wonderful beaches that were not as crowded. There were no loud speakers and cell phones ringing. You could just enjoy the sunshine. So, Crete was really a haven for European tourists, and quite a few Americans started coming in too. The economy was picking up. The city was growing faster and faster every day. People were bringing their children from

the villages to stay in the city, so they could go to high school. Bus lines were created, so they can reach every remote village.

There were still villages without electricity in the early '60s. Quite a few of the villages still had cobblestones for a street, which gave it such a beautiful character. The tourists loved to take pictures of donkeys climbing the cobblestone streets, with some old lady sitting side saddle, coming back to the village carrying things from the country, like fresh vegetables and fruits. So, it was just a quiet, peaceful place to be. It was perfect in many ways

Esarey: And your father was established in his business at that time?

Lang: He was established. He was doing okay. It was a seasonal job most of the time, but he also had some land he had inherited from his parents, some grapes and olive trees. He was crop-sharing with his relatives, so we had some extra income from there.

Esarey: Your brother was in the...

Lang: At that time, he was doing his two years in the military, in the army.

Esarey: I remember you saying that he was in the military. That was required, correct?

Lang: Oh yes. You have to do it eventually, even if you went abroad to study.

Esarey: That sort of paints the picture behind where you were. We have a pretty good idea, I think, when you described meeting George and the dancing and the fact that it was sort of like *South Pacific*, you know, "from across a crowded room." It sounded wonderful. Did he ask for your hand in marriage? How did that work? What did he do? Did he follow any customs?

Lang: Well, we had just really met. We knew each other for about twelve, thirteen days, a very, very short period. He wanted to know if he could go steady with me. I tried to explain to him that, in Greece, we do not date. At the time, there was really no dating. As a matter of fact, you could not even be seen in public unescorted.

Esarey: Arranged marriages?

Lang: Most of them were arranged, even though, at that time, you could fall in love and somehow convince both sides of the family to agree. He kind of looked at me, and I said, "Well, this is a very old country, with old traditions. Normally you go straight from your parents' home to your husband's home. There is no dating



Sonia and George

in between.” He paused, and then he said, “Will you marry me?”

Whoa, I didn’t know what to say. I looked at him, and he said, “I’m asking you because I have to leave in December, and I cannot extend my stay in Greece. If you decide, we have to prepare all kinds of paperwork in order for us to get married.” Of course, I said, “I cannot give you an answer right now, because I have to talk to my parents first. If they refuse to bless us, then, of course, I won’t be able to go anywhere. If you don’t hear from me—I had his phone number, of course—in the next twenty-four hours, please forget all about me.”

I was already in love. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings and said, “I’m in love with you, but I have to talk to my parents.” So, I did talk to my parents. I had a hard time convincing them, of course. But they knew that I was struggling and that I was in love, and they really liked him.

Esarey: They had met him.

Lang: They had met him, and they thought he was such a nice gentleman. His manners were always appropriate, according to our customs. So, eventually they said, “Okay, but we’re going to miss you. You’re going to be so far away.” So, I picked up the phone and said, “George, it’s okay.”

He came in the next evening and brought the rings. Of course, I knew the American custom of a diamond ring or something like that. I didn’t realize he didn’t have the money for a diamond ring. So, my parents blessed the rings, like they do in Greece.

Esarey: They bless the rings?

Lang: The rings on an icon. This icon, as a matter of fact, is hanging in this room. They put them on our fingers, on our left hand, our ring fingers.

Esarey: The parents put the rings on. That is so wonderful.

Lang: Yes, they put them on there. When we got married, those rings are worn on the right hand now. Left means that you’re engaged, right hand, you’re married. George also brought me a beautiful, little pearl, hanging on a golden chain to put around my neck. We had our first kiss when Mother and Father were not in the room though. (both laugh)

Esarey: They gave you that much privacy. (laughs)

Lang: They gave us a little privacy. (laughs) And that was the sweetest thing. I probably was expecting, when George proposed marriage, that it would be someplace like in the Hollywood style, where you’re sitting at a beautiful

dining room table, candle lights, violins playing, and he gets on one knee. But, no, it was not like that. But it has lasted, so it was the right thing.

Esarey: I think it sounds very romantic.

Lang: It was romantic, yes. Then he had to excuse himself, for that Sunday, because he had one more last duty to perform on base, because he had a part-time job with a radio station. So, I was home alone. My parents did their usual Sunday afternoon stroll or went to a movie or something. I was listening to the radio, and the doorbell rang.

My cousin, Manoles Anyfantakis, was in town. He says, "Sonia, let's go out." I said, "Manoles, I cannot go out." He says, "Why?" I said, "Because I am listening to the radio." He said, "Oh, come on, what do you mean, you're listening to the radio? I don't understand." I said, "Yes, of course, it's in English. But the guy, you can hear his voice. Do you know who it is?" And he says, "No." I said, "He is my fiancé." He says, "You're kidding." And I said, "Here." And I showed him the ring. I brought him wedding candy, which is that hard, white almond candy, which is sugar-coated. I will show you in a minute.

Esarey: Yes, you show me.

Lang: He was so shocked. "You mean you didn't call a family gathering?" Because in the old days, at least, you called your uncles and aunts to meet the prospective groom and approve of him.

Esarey: Write down the name of the candy, please.

Lang: Okay.

Esarey: This wedding candy is an interesting custom, as well. Okay, I know I interrupted here. So, they expected you to...

Lang: Oh yes, the whole clan, of course. Not only that, but, "How come you're marrying a foreigner? Aren't there any good enough guys here in town?" Of course, at the time, marriages were arranged.

I remember one time I was in the store. Dad was having lunch upstairs, and this shepherd came in and brought us some wool or something. We're chit-chatting, and I was nice to him. I liked being polite. When my father came down, the shepherd said, "Boy, you've got a very nice girl here. I have a son in the village, and I'll give you so many sheep and so many goats. We can just shake hands today."

Esarey: Make a deal.

Lang: I looked at my father, and my eyes were just saying, “Don’t you even dare!” (both laugh) And he says, “Well, I’ll just wait until she grows up a little bit. But come back in a few years.”

Esarey: And how old were you?

Lang: I was probably about fifteen. (both giggle) Later on, there would be other proposals that came to the back door, like a doctor that wants to marry your daughter. Well, I was eighteen. Why would I want to marry a doctor who was in his thirties or even forties? I wanted somebody who was close to my age, so we could go dancing and have some fun. I was very lucky to find George.

But going back to the family idea, next Sunday, when George was free, we went into the village, where my father’s brothers and sisters lived. A lot of them lived there. So, we decided to go from door to door to say hello and introduce George. Everybody was really surprised, although the word had already spread that Sonia got engaged. But they were very nice to George, because of the Greek hospitality.

In those days, they did not have ovens, like we do, to prepare something special and bake some sweets. In most cases, they would bring you out a box of chocolates and offer you some chocolate and make you coffee. George didn’t drink coffee. They’d give him a little brandy or something like that or local moonshine, which was great.

Esarey: Local moonshine?

Lang: Oh god, yes. I have some here, if you want to try it.

Esarey: (laughs) Well, that would make a real interesting interview here, wouldn’t it?

Lang: Anyway, we went from house to house. Of course, we tried to visit with some of my uncles and aunts. By the end of the day, when we go back in town, George had to excuse himself. He couldn’t even climb the stairs to the house.

Esarey: So much brandy?

Lang: All he remembers is that he managed to get to the Liberty Square, get on the military bus, and, the next thing he knows, he wakes up in his own bed. That means he did pass out. (laughs) So much for hospitality.

Esarey: Well, he couldn’t say no.

Lang: Oh, no, he would hurt their feelings. At least you have a little sip or two.

Esarey: That’s right. He had a lot of family to meet and a lot of sipping.

Lang: Yes, and a lot of sipping. And don't forget the wine that goes with the meal. It's not just one glass of wine. Everybody has two. You cannot drink even a sip of water or wine at the table, without first lifting your glass, telling everybody, "To your health." And, of course, bang those little glasses until you break them.

Esarey: Really.

Lang: Oh yeah, practically. You go around and around and another toast, you know. "May you live long and prosper," type situation and "Be happy." Here comes another round of wine. Then, "Come over here, and let's have a little ouzo," or, "Let's have some moonshine," whatever.

Esarey: And did you drink, too?

Lang: Oh yes. But, because I was female, they would always give me a smaller amount. I could have an excuse not to drink, because a woman is not supposed to be seen drinking. It was not ladylike. But anyway, it was a fun day.

Esarey: This all happened in a one day?

Lang: A single day. We went from house to house, with fifteen to twenty minutes per house.

Esarey: You didn't have much time.

Lang: No.

Esarey: And then what happened, with the marriage?

Lang: We had to start the paperwork right away, because we had to have permission to be engaged and permission to be married.

Esarey: By whom?

Lang: By the United States of America. They wanted to make sure that I did not have a criminal record that I was not of ill-repute or whatever. We had to go through all this paperwork and produce a statement from the police and my birth certificate, etc. Most papers were taken to the advocate, there on base. He would forward them to the American embassy. They would do their share of work, if they were not overwhelmed with all the emigrants trying to get to the states. Hopefully, they knew what they were doing.

Sometimes it was a little confusing, because everything was in a hurry. Even George had to take the plane eventually and go to the embassy himself. I get a call from him, and he says, "Go ahead, go ahead." It was a Thursday.

The printer shop, down the street, had the place ready for the invitations. All we needed was the date. All they had to do was put twenty-six, which was November 26, 1961. They had them in Greek and English, ready to go. They printed them the same day. We started mailing them, and father got on the phone and called every village, because not everybody had a phone in those days. You had to call the café that had the phone and say, "Could you please pass this message to my brother? Tell him that Sonia is getting married this Sunday. Tell everybody else that she's getting married. Everybody is invited."

Esarey: It's like a big open house. Everybody come.

Lang: Yes, and they came. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I had to go and visit the Greek bishop, with my fiancé, to have permission to marry a non-Orthodox and to promise to have my children raised in the Orthodox faith. Unfortunately, there were no Greek churches where we were, so the kids were baptized Catholic. We did marry, first, in the Catholic faith, on base in the chapel.

Esarey: That was a small ceremony?

Lang: Yes, very small, just the bride and the groom, my father, the best man and the taxi driver, as a witness. Mother was still busy finishing up the wedding candy. (both laugh)

Esarey: The taxi driver? Did you know the taxi driver?

Lang: No, of course not.

Esarey: He just came in to witness?

Lang: He just came in—

Esarey: This was before the Greek wedding?

Lang: Before the Greek wedding. After the small ceremony, George stayed behind, because the Greek service would be done a couple of hours later, practically. He stayed behind and would be coming to town with some friends. So, Dad sat next to the taxi driver, and I sat in the back, with the best man. The poor taxi driver didn't know why I was sitting with the best man and not with my husband, because, in those days, you did not hire a taxi for the day. You just would pick up the phone and have them come over. So, he dropped us off at the house. We waited for a while, then we called another taxi that took me to the church.

Esarey: (laughs) Did you have on your wedding gown?

Lang: Oh yes. When we got to the church, the first thing the priest asked for is the papers, you know, the license. Guess what? I was so excited I forgot all about it.

Esarey: So, did the taxi driver go get it?

Lang: No, but Mother had to call a taxi, because I didn't want us to stay in a hotel. We had rented a furnished, little apartment just a little away from my folks, a little peace and quiet for a few days. She took a taxi there. We gave her the key, and she went there looking. We didn't have that much in there, other than a couple of suitcases and some packages and some wedding gifts. She went through everything. Eventually, she made it to the wedding, kind of late, but she made it to the wedding.

The priest escorted George and me from the entrance of the church—as you can see in the picture—into St. Titus Church. In those days, they had a small table that represents the altar, in the middle of the floor, because there were no seats or pews around there. Everybody stands all around in a big circle, around the bride and groom.

Esarey: Would you describe how you put on the crown? How does that work?

Lang: The crown. Well, it starts out with the throne. One of the priests beseeches God's blessings on the double wedding bands and then blesses the bride and the groom with the rings. It was the sign of the cross, of course. The rings are exchanged by the priest and the sponsor. The union is completed with the crowning. The crowns are just two little hoops with silk flowers or something like that.

Esarey: We have pictures of these.

Lang: They're connected with a ribbon, and they are set on the heads of the bride and groom. Then the priest crosses our hands. The wrists are holding each other. They exchange the crowns back and forth three times, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The same thing is done by the sponsor.



Sonia and George on their wedding day in St. Titus Church, November 26 1961, in Heraklion, Crete, Greece.

Then, to celebrate the union, the priest leads the bride and groom around the table. During the service, the bride and groom are also given a taste of honey, mixed with walnuts, to remind them that life can be sweet, but also hard and difficult and to keep that in mind. After the service, you stand in line, and everybody has to come and congratulate you. The relatives usually give the bride something made of gold...those that can afford to. Others give money, and there're also the wedding presents.



So, in this picture, my father is putting a beautiful ring on my finger, and my mother is busy kissing George. When we left the church, everybody went to the restaurant, where the reception or dinner will be. George and I sneaked back to the photography shop.

We had our official photos taken. Then I changed into my dress and left the dress behind. The wedding dress was rented. I also wanted my picture taken alone—which was not a custom then—because I had seen it in the States. That was a new trend.

Esarey: Would you tell us about that?

Lang: Oh, yes. George keeps telling this story—that during the service there is a custom of stepping on the bride's foot—because the priest is saying, "And the wife must obey the husband." The groom is expected to step on her foot. I had told him about it, but George couldn't understand what they were saying, so I sort of tapped his foot to remind him to do that. He claims, to this day, that I stepped on his foot. Of course, everybody laughed because, when I was trying to tap his foot, they thought I was stepping on his foot.

Esarey: (chuckles) Changing the tradition.

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: I mean, that's good. Does he smile when he says that?

Lang: Oh, he giggles a lot.

Esarey: We have a copy of the certificate, as well as the civil registrar's marriage certificate.

Lang: Yes, but then, there was a problem. George had to leave within thirteen days, and because I had been an exchange student, it was in my contract to wait at least two years before returning to the United States. It's possible that students would stay and go straight to college, I suppose. It's so nice here.

We had a hard time getting paperwork done. I was missing George terribly, so I went to the base very often to talk to the lawyer on base, to see if he could expedite the proceedings. He would call the embassy daily, until they found my paperwork. I asked him to please proceed, because we needed it to be done. Apparently, my in-laws had written to their local senator and asked for help. The senator's staff said, "Unfortunately, we cannot help you." But they recommended that this procedure take place in Minnesota, because that's where I lived. So, Glenn and Mable Root in Minnesota contacted the office of Hubert Humphrey,

Esarey: Hubert Humphrey?

Lang: Yes, he was out of the country at the time, but eventually, he did manage to help out, because I had a waiver. Unfortunately, I cannot find the waiver. It was signed by the Attorney General of the United States, who was Robert Kennedy at that time.

Esarey: So far, you can't find it, huh?

Lang: No, I don't know where the waiver ended.

Esarey: Maybe you didn't have it.

Lang: No, we did have it. It's probably in the embassy or somewhere.

Esarey: But Robert Kennedy had to approve it personally?

Lang: Uh-huh.

Esarey: George was living on the base, and you were living at home waiting for this to occur?

Lang: I was waiting for George.

Esarey: And this all had to happen within a few months?

Lang: Yes. By April, everything was in order, and I could rejoin him.

Esarey: So, you married in November, but you couldn't join him until all of this happened in April.

Lang: He was in Moses Lake, Washington.

Esarey: What is this document here?

Lang: This is from the time of the citizenship. We went to Moses Lake, Washington, where eventually our first son was born. His name was John Francis. In this picture, I'm with my husband and expecting our first baby. George was very active in the Boy Scouts all his life and an Eagle Scout.

Esarey: And George was based where?

Lang: He was based in Moses Lake, Washington.

Esarey: What was he doing there? He was in military duty?

Lang: Yes, he was in the military; he was career military. He was a pharmacist.
Esarey: And this is where John was born?

Lang: In that summer of '63, I saw on the news what was going on in Alabama. I was not happy, seeing the governor of the state in front of the school door with his hands behind his back, staring stonily at everybody else saying, "No way. You're not going to allow these students into the building." I was shocked. I had already addressed, to the Honorable Governor of Alabama. I told him that I was regretting the fact that I had chosen America to become my home if America has not been fair to everybody.

Esarey: You wrote this letter to—

Lang: Oh yes, I wish I had made a copy of it.

Esarey: You don't have a copy?

Lang: No, but I did tell him how upset I was, seeing what was going on. I explained to him that slavery ended a century before that, and there was no excuse to treat people in such a way.



**Sonia, John and Leo
(George Jr.) in
Montgomery, AL.**

Esarey: Did he respond?

Lang: No response. But my response was—I don't know if the governor did it or not. George got orders to be transferred to Alabama, of all places. I don't know if that was my punishment or what. I had to face the "Whites Only" signs for about four years down there. I had to see all the riots, the march.

Esarey: Describe some of that. What was your impression of that, as a citizen coming from Greece?

Lang: Oh, I was appalled. I applied for a job on a local newspaper at the time. My English was very sharp, because I had been teaching grammar and everything. They needed someone to help with the editing. The interviewer was shocked

that I scored higher than college graduates, but he didn't hire me. I spoke with an accent. Even if I were a Yankee, he wouldn't hire me. They preferred to hire Southerners in those days.

So, the only job that was offered to me was by a Greek guy from the Greek church that had a restaurant. I went there, and within a week, I couldn't take it. First of all, there were no blacks coming in, other than working in the back, washing dishes. Second, one day there were men in uniforms sitting around the table. One looked Mexican, and the other looked Japanese or oriental of some sort. The other man in uniform was black. The owner forced the black man to leave his establishment. I was so upset I simply said, "Goodbye, I'm not coming back." And I left.

Esarey: This would have been sixty...

Lang: Sixty-four, yes, or '65. Eventually I decided, after Leo, our second son, was born—

Esarey: This was in Alabama.

Lang: In Alabama. I decided to work for the Holiday Inn. The only job they would offer me—being someone with an accent—was that of a waitress, of course.

Esarey: Because of your accent?

Lang: Um-hm. They were very strange at times. So, I tried it. I only lasted a few days, because there was a march.

Esarey: Describe the marches.

Lang: The marches. I could not go because, being a foreigner, you didn't want to be involved. You didn't want to be deported.

Esarey: At that point, you were not yet a naturalized citizen?

Lang: No, but on my way to work I could see that the streets were lined with police. There were military people. Probably they had the National Guard on duty, and I could feel that shiver in my spine even now. This was not the land of the free and the brave for me. I was almost in tears. I couldn't believe this was happening in America, because to me, America was the safest country in the world. There should be no army, there should be no guns.

When I went to work and the people started coming in for lunch, including a lot of black people— in those days, they called them colored people—everybody walked out. Nobody would serve them. I got so disgusted, I went from table to table and took orders from everybody and served

everybody because I said, “No, you have a right to sit right here.” I never went back to that job again, because they were discriminating.

Esarey: Were you treated badly by any of the people?

Lang: The staff? No, they took the orders. They needed the money, I suppose, because there were also a lot of whites in the room. The other thing I noticed too was that churches were segregated. On one corner, you had a Catholic church with whites only, and across the street, a black church only. Well, not in the same neighborhood, because they did really, really segregate. When I was asking, “Why are these people suffering so much? Why can’t you help them to educate themselves, so they can have a good job and produce more and be taxpayers, etc.?” They said, “No, we’re going to keep them in their place.”

Esarey: This is what you would hear?

Lang: Yes. One day, on the bus—because I did not drive in those days—I was going home from downtown. I guess George must have had the kids. An old lady, carrying two or three grocery bags, came in. I got up and gave her my seat. All I could see was white hair. If she was black, to me it didn’t matter. She was just an old lady. I heard all those shouts from all over the bus and words I could not understand. When I repeated them to my husband, he said, “Those are cuss words. Where did you hear them?” They almost threw me out of the bus. So, they sent her to the back. She said, “Don’t worry, don’t worry; I’m okay.” She walked to the back of the bus because, when I turned my head, there was no place to sit down, but somebody else gave her a seat. I didn’t realize that was going on.

We did not have a washing machine for a while, and I used the laundromat. I entered the door that said “Whites only.”

Esarey: In the laundromat?

Lang: The laundromat.

Esarey: Where did the blacks do their laundry?

Lang: They came from the other door, and they’d use the same machines.

Esarey: They had to use a different door?

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: Different machines?

Lang: The same machines.

Esarey: Same machines. Did they have to wait for whites to do their laundry?

Lang: Oh, yes. And they never looked at you in the eye. That's another thing I noticed. The black people, in those days, would not look at you in the eye, because they were told, "You look down. Don't you dare look at your master," from the days of slavery.

Esarey: You were in what city?

Lang: Montgomery, Alabama. And there was a Ku Klux Klan. I didn't get to see them in person, thank goodness. But one time, my husband had sponsored a guy from Africa that came to the base to study. I said, "Well, okay. I'll fix us a Greek dinner. Tell him to come over." My husband says, "Are you crazy?" I said, "Why? Aren't you the sponsor?" He says, "Yes, but we're in Alabama." I said, "So what?" He says, "If you bring a black person into your house, you're going to find a burning cross in your yard."

Esarey: Did you actually ever see any of those?

Lang: I did not see anything like that, but it was just extremely uncomfortable.

Esarey: Every day.

Lang: Every day. Ever since when I was a child, when I read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I had such a feeling that something has to be done for that injustice, something. Even today, we still find prejudice, even in the Land of Lincoln, believe it or not.

Esarey: That was a particularly volatile time. You were in a city where it was happening, and the crisis level was very high.

Lang: Everything was happening. Sometimes I wonder if one of those people at the table that day was Martin Luther King himself, but I don't know. There were hundreds of people in that room, so how would I know?

Esarey: You don't know.

Lang: All I wanted to do was to have them sit at a table that was meant for whites only, so I felt like I was contributing to the cause in my way. I could be out there shouting, but nobody would hear me.

Esarey: But personally, you were not able to even work because of—

Lang: After that, I decided, "No, I'm just going to stay home and be a good mother, period."

Esarey: I'm trying to get through this. How long were you in Montgomery?

Lang: For about four years.

Esarey: That's a long time.

Lang: Oh, yes.

Esarey: When you left, had anything changed in the political climate at that time?

Lang: Oh, by that time, yes, not very much. The prejudice was there. It was in '66, I got my citizenship, and I believe, at that time, Lyndon Johnson had passed the Civil Rights Act. The young boy that used to come and mow the yard for us would finally look at me in the eye.

Esarey: So, when you applied for citizenship, did you have to go through classes, or how did that process work?

Lang: Well, yes, but I already knew American history. I had studied in the States, and my English was pretty good. It wasn't that much difficulty to fill out the paperwork, etc. I was sworn in by the same judge—George said his name was Johnson—who was very anti-segregation, yes.

But you know, there were good times there, too. There were lots of new friends, and there was a Greek community. We travelled. We went to Pensacola, Florida, to the beach. We did this and that. We visited his parents here and there.

Esarey: Do you have a very strong memory of this political unrest?

Lang: Yes. There was a place called Jasmine Hill, which is still in existence. It's in the picture here. We used to visit that very often, because it reminded me of Greece. It had a temple of Poseidon and had all kinds of Greek statues. There were azaleas in bloom in the spring, especially in June. It was something to remember.

Esarey: We have pictures here of Jasmine Hill, a touch of Greece in Montgomery, Alabama, 1965. Okay, after you left Montgomery—

Lang: We went in '67 to Wichita Falls, Texas. We did not stay there very long because George got orders to go to Vietnam.

Esarey: To be a pharmacist in Vietnam?

Lang: Yes, yes.

Esarey: And where was he stationed?

Lang: Saigon. He arrived about the time of the big trouble they had there, the Tet Offensive. So, I decided to go to Greece before he left. We had trouble in America, because people were very anti-war. I don't like war either, but I would not threaten the life of people.

One of our neighbors occasionally called me to babysit for her, as she wanted to go out for a while. She told me that one night she got a phone call that was very scary. Somebody called her husband a baby killer. A few weeks later, somebody actually did take a shot at her house, with the children inside and her inside.

Esarey: This happened where?

Lang: In Wichita Falls, Texas.

Esarey: Wichita Falls?

Lang: Um hum. The anti-war people were adamant about that idea that we have to stop the war one way or another. But I don't know how the women and children could do anything about stopping the war. Their husbands were in the military. They obeyed orders. Thank goodness it was not like obeying Hitler, but it was a war. It had its reasons.

Esarey: But you went back to Greece at that time, while he was in Saigon?

Lang: Yes. When we got to Athens, my father was waiting for us. Within five minutes, those kids were climbing all over "Papou," Grandpa. They loved him right away. He was very loving and out-going. He was very sweet.



A temporary Greek Visa was issued to Sonia in June, 1968 to return to Crete with her sons.

Esarey: That was good for you too.

Lang: The thing is that they were treated the whole time as children of a hero, who was fighting a war. Grandpa would be walking around with them at the park, for instance, and, "Who are those cute little kids who are wearing long pants?" According to Greek custom, although it was cold, the boys, at the time, were wearing shorter pants. In the old days, when you were twelve or so, you'd be wearing long pants.

So, they stood out, and they were cute. They were blond, and that's what happened. People would buy the kids all kinds of candy and treats. They

enjoyed every moment of it. I was extremely worried. That's George's picture in Vietnam.

Esarey: Did he describe to you what was going on during that time?

Lang: I have saved all his letters. Some of them are very uncomfortable, but he tried to keep some of the details out, because he did not see much fighting in person. He did see all the bodies that came into the hospital.

On occasion, they would grab him as a medic and take him out to the field, because they needed him. He had to be there. Plus, he had to go out with the medical team to various villages and administer medication to the sick. There were no other doctors in the area. He saw so much pain and poverty. He was terribly upset. He wished he could adopt every orphan that he met.



George in Vietnam

Esarey: How old was George then?

Lang: In '68, he was thirty. I kept myself busy on base. I got involved with the wives club there. I was teaching them Greek. I took them on tours. We would take the whole bus from the base and go to villages for them to do their shopping and look around. I took them to Knossos and other places. Of course, I had to study as much as I could, from the American library there on base, about the history of the area and make sure that I knew what I was talking about. We had a wonderful time.

We went to a Greek restaurant one time by the Lion's Square. In those days you could actually go into the kitchen to see the food and sample it. So, everybody got some food, and we had a nice big meal. Then, when everybody needed to go and use the restroom, they came to my mother's house, (laughs) because public restrooms did not have decent toilets in those days.

Esarey: I never considered that, but, of course.

Lang: Mother was so excited to see all these nice ladies and said, "Sit down, and I'll make you some coffee." I said, "No, no. There's too many of them." (chuckles) I kept busy. At the same time, I met other Greek ladies with husbands who were in Vietnam. They did not know enough English to correspond with their husbands, so I was the one writing all the love letters.

Esarey: How wonderful!

Lang: I was also the one that translated all the incoming mail.

Esarey: Which must have been uncomfortable at times.

Lang: At times, yes. And I was the one who took them to the commissary on base to teach them how to shop. "This is corn. This is creamed corn. Don't look at the picture. Pay attention to the word," you know. "This is what you do when you buy things in America, and this is what you have to expect, when you get to America." So, I did make some long life friends since then.

When we heard that George was going to be stationed back on Crete, we were trying to find an apartment—partially furnished, until our things came out of storage—that would be close to the base, because George likes to have his eight hours of sleep. Greeks eat supper at nine. They talk and drink this and that and go to bed at midnight. If George had an apartment in town, he would have to go to bed at 1:00 in the morning at times, and get up at 5:30 or so, to catch the bus to go to work. I don't think he had good sleep at war time. So, we found us a villa near the base. It was split into apartments. On one side, lived a teacher. We rented the other half. It had a huge garden.

Esarey: What was the timeframe? How long was he in Vietnam?

Lang: For a whole year.

Esarey: One whole year and then came back and was based in Greece, in Crete.

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: And that's what you're talking about now?

Lang: So, behind us, in about a hundred yards or so, there was the beach. It was a rocky one, but it was a beach. The house had a huge yard, with an arbor, covered with a grape vines, fruit trees and flowers galore. George loved to play in the garden. That was his therapy. He was so busy bringing the garden to life. Not that he exactly forgot about the war, but he healed faster.

Esarey: Just being in this wonderful place.

Lang: Yes, and all the love he got from all the relatives. We got us a little car. On Sunday, we would leave the kids with Grandma and Grandpa. They just couldn't wait for that. We would take off with our younger friends and tour the island.

On other Sundays, we would be with Grandma and Grandpa and my brother and his wife. We would go someplace out in some beach or some little village or some ancient ruins and have a day with just the family. It was wonderful. I had the best of everything. I had Greece, and I had my little America, with its own little beach.

Esarey: You were helping a lot of Greek women to communicate with their husbands. You know what? We have to stop.

Lang: Okay.

Esarey: I hate to stop, but this may be a good spot.

(End of interview session #2)

Interview with Sonia Lang

IM-A-L-2010-049.03

Interview # 3: December 11, 2010

Interviewer: Carol Esarey

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Esarey: This is the third interview with Sonia Lang. The title of this series is *Immigrant Stories*. My name is Carol Esarey, and I'm an interviewer with the Oral History Program of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, Illinois. Today's date is December 11, 2010, and we are in Sonia's home. This interview is part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's *Immigrant Stories* and is considered a historical document.

Okay, and away we go today. Sonia and I have just been talking a little bit about how to proceed this morning. I think we're going to go through this wonderful collection of pictures and stories about Sonia's life that will probably bounce us around a little bit in time zones and years and events. But in the first two interviews we really did not talk at all about Sonia's art,

Sonia's transition into her present world and what she's been doing in her poetry.

We want to concentrate on her life as she has proceeded here today. So bear with us as we move along through this book. At different times, I'm going to ask Sonia to read a few things into the record so that we've got on tape some of the things we've talked about in the first two interviews. Pretty soon here I'm going to stop talking, because I'm not the one who should be talking anymore.

I think what we talked about last time was Sonia's wedding. She described in great detail what a Greek wedding is like. Sonia, I'd like you to read a little piece about the traditional ceremony that you wrote for us.

Lang: There were many relatives and friends to join in this celebration. During the services, the priest quotes from the Bible. The woman must fear her husband. According to custom, the husband sort of steps on the bride's foot, establishing his dominion over the woman. George swears that I stepped on his foot. All I remember was laughter. The truth is, that I tried to use sign language with my foot to coax him to follow the custom.

While our guests headed for the restaurant, George and I stopped at the photographers to have our pictures taken. The wedding was followed with a wonderful dinner and delicious food, wine, toast after toast, music and dancing. George was exhausted from work.

Esarey: (laughs)

Lang: No, wasn't exhausted, but was excused from work for one full day. That was our honeymoon, one full day. One pharmacist there; they couldn't spare him. (chuckles)

He left for the States thirteen days later. I could not follow him, due to immigration rules. I had to complete two full years away from the States, where I had spent a year as an exchange student. That meant eight long months. We had only known each other for a total of three months. Trying to bypass the rules and have the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy sign a waiver took four months. That's another story.

Esarey: That's another story? You haven't talked about that story.

Lang: Well, George's parents did write to their senator, and the senator asked them to send that information to the Roots, in Minnesota. The Roots, in Minnesota, contacted Senator Humphrey's office. He was out of town at the time, but eventually he did push the paperwork through. So, the Roots received a letter, April 16, 1962, stating, "I have just received word from our embassy office

that a visa was issued to Mrs. Aspasia Lang. Please tell the young couple I wish them every good thing in life. It was a pleasure to help them. With all best wishes, signed, "Sincerely Yours, Hubert H. Humphrey."

Esarey: That is an historical document in itself.

Lang: Yes, um-hm.

Esarey: That's what paved the way for you?

Lang: Oh yes, because, of course, immigration is always overwhelmed with applications. I was such a sweet little thing that I had to go and complain to the lawyer every day to say, "Please, what's going on? I want to go and see my husband." Bless his heart; he did help a lot.

Esarey: Did you do it yourself? I mean, was that you that was able to make this happen?

Lang: Well, the lawyer basically made recommendations, and his suggestions were seriously followed. So, needless to say, George was informed immediately. (chuckles)

Esarey: What happened after that? How did the process go?

Lang: Well, since I had the visa, all I had to do was just come to the States. There was no problem.

Esarey: Is that a part of some of the material we have?

Lang: Um hmm, yeah.

Esarey: So, this letter paved the way for the immigration officials to allow you to proceed to immigrate.

Lang: Yes, yes.

Esarey: When did you become a citizen? Perhaps you've already told me this.

Lang: It was March 25, 1966. I haven't been able to locate the document just yet, too many papers in this home.

Esarey: Well, I think you're doing marvelously.

Lang: I was able to locate a letter, addressed to me, from the office of the United States Senate. Lester Hill was the senator at the time. "Dear Mrs. Lang, I congratulate you on becoming a citizen of the United States of America. I am

so pleased to learn that you have satisfied all the requirements for citizenship. You are to be commended for your decision to give our country and our constitution your loyalty and your support. As a citizen of the United States, as you know, you receive many privileges that carry with them great responsibilities. In your new status, you will find many opportunities for serving our country, our state and our fellow citizens. I wish you every success in every new effort and endeavor. As your senator from the great state of Alabama, I am here in Washington to represent you as a citizen of Alabama. If I can be of assistance to you, please feel free to let me hear from you. Again, my hearty congratulations and best wishes to you in your new citizenship.”

According to George, the judge that swore us in that particular day was a Mr. Johnson, who was against segregation, with all his heart. So was I, and it really hurt. The first time that I heard the national anthem, as a citizen, was in Alabama. I put my hand over my heart and tried to repeat the words. Across from me, far away, was one section for the “colored folks” of those days. And here I am, a foreign born citizen, with more rights than they had at the time. So, it was bittersweet.

The senator over here says it carries many responsibilities. That’s true. He was hoping that I would do something for my new country. I haven’t stopped. Every place I am, I use my talents and my interests to volunteer to paint walls with art for plays, to go to schools and demonstrate how to do art, to read to children, etc. So, I feel like I’ve been a good citizen so far.

Esarey: You described, last time, situations that you opposed, to show the disparities during those years of the ‘60s in the south, while you were in Montgomery. You were in Montgomery, correct?

Lang: Oh yes, yes, as a matter of fact, when we had the show in Greece, later on, in St. Marco’s Basilica, this particular picture here, called “The Protest,” in India ink and brush, drew attention. I’m quoting from the newspaper, “From all the drawings of Mrs. Sonia Lang, the



“The Protest”

one that stands out is “The Protest.” It is well-known how the racial struggle affects the Americans and touches the whole world. This inspired Mrs. Lang, in “The Protest,” to bring forth in her painting a human voice.” It was from the newspaper, *Mesogios*, November 12, 1969.

Esarey: And you have another one here...

- Lang: It's called "Despair," with the arms raised towards the heaven, as the people are hoping for a better future. As a matter of fact, I was babysitting the show one day, and there was this gentleman that came in, and he said, "Are you Aspasia?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Wait a minute." He ran out to his car, came back, and brought me two of his books of poetry and autographed them right there. He said, "Your art speaks in my language, only I use words."
- Esarey: Who was this gentleman?
- Lang: Thanasis Tsakiridis [a poet]. Isn't it amazing? You meet people through the arts because you have the same soul.
- Esarey: Did you do this? I see another one.
- Lang: That's from another show, but since we're talking about Alabama—
- Esarey: Yes, talking about Alabama, this is how you had to respond.
- Lang: And I haven't stopped. (chuckles) I'm always finding something going on in the world that will—
- Esarey: It's such a powerful introduction to our society. It never left your conscience or your heart.
- Lang: No. Because, when I lived in Blue Earth, Minnesota, for a year, there were no African-Americans at all, so I did not understand. I was an innocent child then, at heart. I was too busy having fun to notice what was going on.
- Esarey: And you arrived at probably one of the most volatile times that we've had in this century.
- Lang: Exactly, um-hm.
- Esarey: You put it in your art. Is there more there, of that time?
- Lang: Not for this particular event. But, since we're talking about my year in Minnesota, here I am, back in 1963, with the Roots and George and our little baby John. It says here, "All exchange students, like MacArthur, vowed they will return some day to the home of their U.S. foster parents and their adopted home town. Mrs. George Lang, pictured here with her husband and their son, John Francis, and Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Root, in whose home she stayed while attending school here in '59-'60, is one who returned. The Lang's arrived Wednesday from Moses Lake, Washington and will leave this weekend for Montgomery, Alabama, where he, as a pharmacy technician, will instruct in Gunter Air Force Base pharmacy school."

“The Langs were married November 26, 1961, in Crete, after Sonia returned there, following her year in Blue Earth. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Washington. A vital statistic, Roots feed well. Sonia weighed eighty-eight pounds the first time that she came to their home. When she left, she weighed over one hundred and today is under the century mark again, at ninety-six (chuckles). Lang has learned something of Greek customs from his wife, recalling that the husband was to stamp on his bride’s toes, during the wedding ceremony, to show who’s the boss. “She didn’t tell me. She stepped on mine.”

Esarey: (laughs) There it is, for the world to see!

Lang: Yeah.

Esarey: He never forgot that, did he? He’s got to remind you. (both laugh) That is a very wonderful article, actually. And these are these wonderful people.

Lang: Yes. Well, they were my extra set of parents. I’ve known them longer than my own, and we shared some good memories. They came to Crete. We went together to Crete in ‘77.

Esarey: Are they still with us?

Lang: No, not any more, not any more. As a matter of fact, I do have some pictures of them here, when they visited us.

Esarey: When you were in Blue Earth?

Lang: In ’89, we went to their golden wedding anniversary. Our golden wedding anniversary will be next year. Their daughter is hopefully coming. I went to her wedding, so I asked her to come for our golden wedding anniversary.

Esarey: Fifty years.

Lang: Fifty years.

Esarey: You will celebrate.

Lang: Um-hum. I went to a class reunion in ’95. Here we are, together again, with some of my classmates. There’s me on the right and the house where I stayed. Of course, they’re getting old in these pictures. Glenn was ninety-one when he died, February, 1998.

Esarey: That was a tremendous difference in location in our country, living up in Minnesota and going to Blue Earth.

- Lang: But I learned such wonderful family traditions and even the housekeeping skills that I lacked thoroughly. I had no idea how to boil water, and I still don't, in some ways (chuckles). But at least I learned how to iron. I learned how to fold clothes, because I was helping here and there. It was nice that she allowed me to do that, because Mother didn't want me to do those things. She wanted me to marry some very wealthy Greek and have servants do that.
- Esarey: So, did you not learn how to cook when you were young?
- Lang: No, never. Thank goodness George knew how to cook. He's still quite a chef. So, between the two of us, with a lot of trial and error...like my first brick bread. It was as heavy, as a brick. (laughs) You know, now everybody says I'm such a gourmet cook, but I'm not. It's just standard good dishes.
- Esarey: That's interesting that your mother had a plan.
- Lang: Oh, she had a plan alright. It's just that she couldn't believe that I fell in love and was going to go so far away. But she never regretted it, because she knew I was happy.
- Esarey: Were you your mother's daughter? She sounds like an independent woman.
- Lang: In this family picture, with our first son, we're in Washington, and I'm expecting. This skinny little thing gained forty pounds with number one son.
- Esarey: Where were you?
- Lang: In Washington state. This is when we were visiting some friends in Oregon.
- Esarey: How long did George stay in the service?
- Lang: Twenty years.
- Esarey: So, he was full career.
- Lang: Full career.
- Esarey: And you started in Montgomery.
- Lang: No, we started in Washington state.
- Esarey: Washington state, then—
- Lang: I always liked Washington. Then we went to Montgomery, Alabama. Then we ended up in Wichita Falls, Texas.
- Esarey: Oh boy.

Lang: Then George went to Vietnam, and I went to Greece, with the kids. Thank goodness they sent him back from Vietnam to Crete. I found us a lovely home for him to relax, away from all the noises. We stayed a couple of years, and then we came back to the States. While I was there, I got involved in the arts.

Esarey: Is this a picture of the boys?

Lang: Well, this is when we arrived, February 17, 1968, when they met their grandfather for the first time. They just fell in love with him immediately. They couldn't speak Greek, and he couldn't speak English, but just the love radiated between the three of them. While we were in Athens and we were walking around Constitution Square, I heard the loud speakers...propaganda. The year before we arrived, we had a military take-over in Greece.

Esarey: What year was that?

Lang: In 1967. That dictatorship lasted until 1974. I felt cold chills in my spine. I still do. There were a lot of men in uniforms. It was February. Normally in February, we have nice warm days. People sit outdoors at the cafes and chit-chat. But it was almost dead. There were some people talking, but whispering. A man in uniform, a soldier, that is, gave me a pamphlet. The pamphlet was praising the new government and asking everybody to unite against the communists, etc.

Esarey: What was the new government?

Lang: Their excuse was to get rid of the king and to prevent a communist takeover. You see, we always had that fear. Not because of the Russians, but because we had a civil war, back in the '40's.

Esarey: This was a military coup?

Lang: This was a military coup, and the tanks were rolling down the main streets of every major city. Church bells were ringing in my home town. People didn't know what was going on. Women ran to the churches for sanctuary, and I heard that they actually used barbed wire, big rolls, around churches, so that people could not go in or out.

Esarey: Were you there during that time?

Lang: No, I came after that. But while I was at Constitution Square, I realized that the junta was in control. Every time I would turn around and ask my relatives, or even my father, he would say, "Oh, don't worry about it. Don't ask too many questions." People were afraid somebody might be listening.

As a matter of fact, one time, when George came back, we went with the kids to a camp at the Marathon Plains. We took a boat. I wanted to sleep on the deck, so that I could see the stars. I regretted that, because I caught a nasty cold and a strep throat after that. But I noticed some people, sitting separately, very silently. I asked, "What is going on?" because I saw some armed soldiers near them. They said, these are detainees that they're taking to the island. Well, apparently the junta had found some remote islands, with places that the king used as prisons, without any heat, without basic necessities, and there was no lawyer to represent you. There was no trial, other than a military tribunal. There was no evidence.

If anybody wanted to get rid of you, they would go to the authorities and say, "Sonia is a communist." Next thing I know, I would be in some prison. The colonels were all mixed up in many ways in their head, I think.

Esarey: These were considered political prisoners?

Lang: Of course, of course. Hundreds and thousands of people ended up in prison.

Esarey: Hundreds of thousands?

Lang: And thousands. Greece was vacated of all intellectuals, because intellectuals will step up and complain about the situation. Or they were exiled, including people like Mikis Theodorakis. Theodorakis is one of our favorite composers, and he has brought new life, along with Manos Hatzidakis, to the Greek music. Even Melina Mercouri, the actress, also went into exile.

Esarey: These were musicians?

Lang: Anybody who could get away got away from there, especially if they were communist in some way. Those who could afford to, escaped, but the insanity of the colonels did not stop there. They actually banned books, including all the books of Kazantzakis. Nikos Kazantzakis would have gotten the Nobel, but never did. He is one of our world famous authors, who came from the island of Crete.

Esarey: I'm going to ask you to write that down.

Lang: Yes, they're all in here.

Esarey: Oh, they're in here. Okay.



Sonia arranged an artists' gathering and show at the Atlantis Hotel, 1969, in Heraklion, Crete, during the military Junta (1967-1974). Awards were given by the governor of the state of Heraklion.

Lang: Kazantzakis had died in 1957, so twenty years after his death, his books were banned. But his books and his life were back in full glory, when we were there in 2004. There was a fantastic exhibit in Saint Marcos Basilica of all his writings, translations of his books in hundreds of languages, manuscripts, etc., photos. They actually have a little museum in his honor at the village of Myrtia or Varvari, where I spent my summers as a child. So, I had the opportunity to see the museum, while I was there.

And the insanity of the colonels continued. They actually banned the play *Antigone*. *Antigone* was written in ancient times. It had nothing to do with communism, but Antigone defies the government, when her uncle says, "You cannot bury your brother." She sneaks at night and picks up a handful of soil and sprinkled it all over his dead body, so his soul can rest and go to Hades. She defied the government. Of course, we know she paid, by being buried alive.

Esarey: This lasted until how many—

Lang: Until 1974, seven years.

Esarey: What happened?

Lang: Well, they made a big mistake. They decided to unite independent Cyprus with Greece. They sent military troops to the island, which was partitioned already by the British, in half, half one part for the Greeks and one for the Turks. They were co-existing peacefully in those days. Of course, the Turks and their chiefs and their planes pushed back the Greeks. They took more Greek towns under their control, and that was the last straw.

Esarey: That was it.

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: You were here when all this happened? How did you keep track of this?

Lang: Well, from the news and telephone calls.

Esarey: Were those the days before you could—

Lang: We were worried that there would be a big war between Greece and Turkey at the time. It seemed like old animosities needed a little spark, and they just would start a big fire after that.

Esarey: When was the last time you were in Greece?

Lang: Two thousand and seven, yeah, three years ago.

Esarey: It's a whole different world now. Isn't it?

Lang: It is. It's very modern, very crowded, at times very noisy, but the Greeks still know how to have fun and to enjoy the sunshine.

Esarey: And they have their own country.

Lang: They have their own country. It is socialism, believe it or not. It's not democracy any more. It's socialism. And socialism tends to be very expensive, because they try to take care of everybody in many ways, from healthcare to housing to whatever. It's very expensive, and, unfortunately, they are bankrupt right now.

Esarey: They're not alone in Europe.

Lang: No, no, no.

Esarey: What do you think will happen?

Lang: Ah, it will take at least two or three years, just to stabilize it a little bit. After that, it will take another generation to pay off just the interest on those loans. What happened to Greece, when they left the drachma and they joined the euro, was the Europeans already were making more money than the Greeks, if they decided, then, that all the grapes all over Europe should be sold for \$5 a pound, the Greek, who was making \$2.00, or two euros an hour, if you were lucky, could not afford to buy a pound of grapes that they grew only a mile away from his house.

When they adjusted everything, all the prices on all merchandise and food products had to match, the same as in Sweden. But the pay remained small. Everybody is bankrupt, because they had to borrow money just to make ends meet and now use the credit card to pay the other credit card. They say an average Greek today owes 100,000 euros to some bank.

Esarey: Oh, my!

Lang: It is that bad, and the average income is low. For instance, my nephew, Ioannis or John, is a computer programmer. He would be starting at a salary of 30,000 in this country, and, within a year, he'll be making forty, etc. His income at the moment, if he's lucky, is about \$11,000 a year. Yet the cost of living, when I was there, was higher than Springfield or even California that we visited last summer.

Esarey: You can't sustain on that, even as a very highly educated person in a respected profession.

Lang: No.

Esarey: Are people leaving Greece?

Lang: A lot of them, especially the graduates from college.

Esarey: The younger people.

Lang: The younger people cannot find any jobs.

Esarey: Where are they going?

Lang: Any place in Europe or any place in the States, if they can. We're losing a lot of new, good talent. But it is happening all over the world, too.

Esarey: Yes. Have you put any of this in your art?

Lang: Well, with the grandchildren around, I've been trying to make happier pictures.

Esarey: Okay.

Lang: Beautiful colors, people floating in the sky. They're free. They don't have any worries.

Esarey: But you have a lot of serious pictures, as well.

Lang: Oh, I have a lot of them. Well, there is a serious picture here, for instance. This is a part of four pieces that were done in terra cotta, "Spoils of War."

Esarey: Let's read this.

Lang: "Art created in Illinois." This was back in 1983. I had some clay left over. I was making a large urn on top of my kitchen table, using the coil method. So, somehow it collapsed, and I didn't want to throw the pieces away. I was listening to a radio show, describing what would happen if we had a nuclear war that moment, when the heat wave struck you. So, the faces I created that day was like melting, as they're dying, as they're evaporating.

Esarey: It shows in that picture.

Lang: Um-hm.

Esarey: Do you still have all of these?

Lang: Well, they were sold, but I have pictures of those.

Esarey: So, these were works that you created to sell as an artist.

Lang: This was different. Yes, yes. This was back in 1984, at the U of I. You can see it over there, at the corner.

Esarey: Yes, okay.

Lang: It's a hollow casting with plaster. This is a mask. I call it "The Mask in Bronze." A friend of mine wanted me to make a copy of her face, so I did make a plaster mold of her face. But, before I gave it to her, I did brush in some wax, so I can keep it. She was from central Mexico somewhere, so I was thinking of the Aztecs.

Esarey: An interesting face.

Lang: Yes, and it's on this wall over here. It still survives.

Esarey: Let's talk about this event.

Lang: Well, a doctor friend, who was born in Vienna in 1909, escaped the Nazis, with his family. Eventually he did make it to Danville, but, unfortunately, could not practice as a doctor in Danville, because he was Jewish...talk about discrimination. He was practicing at the little town of Catlin, Illinois. He delivered all the children there. He bandaged everybody. He took care of everybody for the rest of his life, and he died in 1976. So, when I was there, in the early '80s, the Lion's Club of Catlin, Illinois, commissioned me to create a bust.

Esarey: How did they find you?

Lang: Well, I lived there the year I was going to school. I was doing sculptures, participating in every art exhibit on the park, any place, (chuckles) every place. So, they liked what they had seen of some of my work. Since I did not have to pay for a foundry—I could use the foundry at school—I said, yes, I'll only charge them a \$1,000 for the material, not for the labor. But it was a nice learning experience.

Esarey: Is this you?

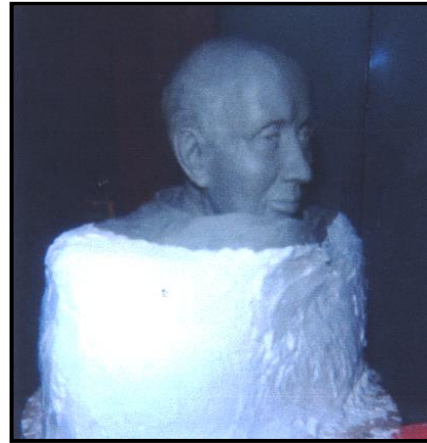
Lang: Yes. Once it was finished in clay, I had to build a clay wall around it and then another wall of plaster to protect it, so I could pour in the rubber mold.

Esarey: I want to ask you, how did you learn to do this?

Lang: In school, oh yes. Then back in school here I am using the rubber mold. I have started creating two pieces that are in blocks and are going to be joined together. Eventually another big mold outside and inside—it's very complicated.

Esarey: Sounds like it. (laughs)

Lang: We used the lost wax method. It's cast, and here I'm correcting all the little holes, because I had to use nails the wax to separate the inner core that was solid from the outer core that was also solid. Of course, when the wax melts, I didn't want those two to crush, because I wouldn't be able to pour in the molten bronze.



A work in progress, using the lost wax method. This was Sonia's final project, completed in 1985, shortly before she received her B.A. from the University of Illinois.

I did everything but the pouring. That was too heavy. The crucible alone, empty, weighed over a hundred pounds. So, I let the guys do it. I have the whole transcript of the particular dedication, which took place June 23, 1985, at the Methodist Church in Catlin, Illinois. By the way, that piece that I made weighed a hundred pounds, and I did lift it.

Esarey: It must have weighed more that you did.

Lang: Probably (laughs). In this picture, the granddaughters are looking at their grandfather for the first time, because he had already passed away.

Esarey: That must have been an emotional moment.

Lang: Yes, his son, David, came. He's also a poet and a writer, and he describes his visit to my home.

“I went to visit Sonia Lang. She was making the statue in her kitchen. It was a gigantic piece of clay that resembled my father. Then, Sonia said an extraordinary thing. Working only from photographs and never having met my father, she asked if there was anything my mother, brother, daughter or I might be able to add to enlighten her. So, we worked for the next five hours on the statue. It was tremendously difficult to make the statue look like the man, but it was one of the most wonderful experiences to participate in. Sonia Lang used a kind of magic. She even used a tape of my father's voice that I had made many years ago, to get the feeling for the man she's never met.”

Of course, he didn't know that, while I was working on that, I listened to Strauss's waltzes for almost two hundred hours, (chuckles) because Dr. Keen loved to play Strauss on his piano.

Esarey: It took you two hundred hours?

Lang: Well, all the different stages to get there, not counting the bronze part. [Son again] "And so, the statue was made, and I travelled to Vienna. There I learned many things about my father that I had always wanted to know. Vienna is such a long way from Catlin. It's even farther from Danville. (Sonia chuckles) It's full of cathedrals and palaces, and then I realized something. The water tower of Catlin and the grain elevator and the spires of the two churches were more beautiful to my father than the palaces of Vienna, because they represented to him freedom to live his life as he wanted to.

"So we returned, in a sense, to Jerusalem. Here, in a church, it's proper that we remember in the Ten Commandments, that we will have no false images or objects of honor. We are here to honor a person, but also the power of healing that came through my father. And, in the act of honoring, we have followed the fifth commandment, to honor our parents.

"I thought about it, and it isn't just honoring my biological father. What is happening here is that we are honoring one of the fathers of the town of Catlin. So, we see that, in honoring one of our parents, we preserve the best that is in the world. We remember, and so it continues.

When I came home from making the statue, I was very moved by it, and I would like to conclude now, with a poem that I wrote about the experience of the statue. The poem is called 'The Age of Bronze,' and it tries to explain what it is like to have a statue made in honor of one's father. I was looking at a black candle, and the poem explains the rest." It is called "The Age of Bronze," and he read it. Here's a copy of it, with a dedication, "For Sonia, who fashioned a helmet of memory, a Greek sculptor of our time and place. With gratitude, David."

Esarey: Those are beautiful words.

Lang: So I have such a nice memory. It's still there, of course, but it isn't at the Methodist Church. It's at the Catlin City Hall.

Esarey: They'll never forget you.

Lang: No, but I visited there a couple or three years ago, and I did visit the statue too.

Esarey: You have to; you have to. It's a part of you.

Lang: I got my degree in sculpture, experimenting with different materials, different ideas. I did a whole series of little bronzes, little people in groups, based on the poem, "The Wasteland," of T.S. Eliot. Until then, I had pushed all the ugliness of war that I could think of, including Vietnam, to the deepest recesses of my mind. But when I read "The Wasteland," it brought back a flood of memories and a flood of upheaval that still goes on in our world. So, my little people are probably the only thing that will survive our planet someday, if we blow it up, because they resemble blades of grass, and they resemble rock. They resemble natural objects. As an artist, I see things as I'm driving around places, especially around Greece. I see profiles of people, et cetera.

Esarey: (inaudible)

Lang: It's constant, and when I read the special poetry, it does reinforce those ideas.

Esarey: Was it a healing thing? Does it take a toll, or does it do both?

Lang: It does both, but it's a form of catharsis also.

Esarey: When you took me around the office downstairs, and we looked at the pictures, there was joy; there was pain; there was a little bit of everything. Sonia has a book of poetry. This is your poetry, correct?

Lang: Correct. I'm sure there are one or two about war in here. But it was such a long time ago.

Esarey: When did you write this book?

Lang: Well, I printed it back in 2002. "War Games," let's read that one. Okay, page 44: "'Fragments of Tomorrow to Come.' Tonight we will keep vigil, among our fears and unanswered prayers. Shut the windows. Bolt the doors. Uncover the mask of the world to expose the horror. Do not ask me why tomorrow lurks behind electronic intelligence and formulas, given to a child to play war. Let us light the candles; burn the incense by the threshold. Let us not incite the Fates. By the threshold I will study the shadows."

Esarey: Were you writing from experience?

Lang: I was probably listening to what was happening in Central America at the time. There's always bad news. Bad wars.

Esarey: You have a joy in you as well.

Lang: Oh yes, there's always—

Esarey: A sense of fun.

Lang: Oh yes.

Esarey: I think that comes out in the colors in some of the art.

Lang: When I went back, in '89, to Crete to visit my brother who was not feeling very well, I was bathed in the light of God, I think, because, when I was in the church, where we got married, I



Several of Sonia's color sketches, displayed at the 2010 Prairie Art Alliance Exhibit

went up to the balcony area, which at one time was used only by women. Still, if one wants peace and quiet, you go up there. I looked down, facing the altar. Behind the altar, of course, you're facing east. The sunlight came through the stained glass window and bathed the whole church in some beautiful, out-worldly light. I looked left and right at the icons and the angels and the Byzantine eyes. To me, Byzantine eyes were always too stern, too serious. But I wanted to, at least, be able to put angels in my art.

So, later on, in 1994, I created this piece, inspired by a poem and the music of Theodorakis. The song talks about the house, with a garden by the sea. The water came by the door, and there were angels in the sky. They were carving your name with the swords in the water. Of course, I didn't want to put swords. I just put some angels. One of them, the male angel is dressed, as you can see, in a Cretan outfit, the way my grandfather used to dress. He's wearing the white boots that a lot of the new Cretans wear, when they do their dance.

And the symbolism—all the plants and the trees, even the tiny little flowers—were taken from Byzantine icons. That's me at the window, always daydreaming. Above me, for the first time in my art, appears this apple tree of the moon, too far away. It's the tree of knowledge, and I'm still searching for the truth.

Esarey: You have other art with that, too, and the angels, right?

Lang: Art of the angels. After a few years of doing the angels, all of a sudden the books were about angels, and everybody else was doing angels. But I don't know why.

Esarey: They've become very popular.

Lang: They became popular. I think I was first (laughs).

Esarey: You were first. I like that.

Lang: So, I started experimenting again with a lot of symbolism. There's a tree in the creation, according to Sonia.

Esarey: Who is that?

Lang: In this picture, here, my granddaughter and I are playing little flutes. None of us knew how to play, but we had fun. Then, back in April of 2002, we had a Greek artist, Antigoni Joni, perform here, at the university, a classical guitarist. We had a little reception for her, at the house, afterwards, because she was staying with us anyway. Next to her is Russell Brazzel. He is the gentleman that keeps the classical guitar group going all these years. So, it was fantastic.

Esarey: Is he from Greece?

Lang: No, he's from Springfield.

Esarey: Oh, he's from Springfield?

Lang: Yes, she's the one from Greece. It got so cold that weekend, she had to borrow George's winter coat to get to Chicago. She shipped it back. (chuckles) Now she's married and lives in Italy and is world-famous for her performances.

Esarey: You have friends all over the world, don't you?

Lang: Oh yes.

Esarey: Did we miss anything back here?

Lang: Well, of course, in my studio you find the grandchildren experimenting with watercolors.

Esarey: Are you teaching them?

Lang: No, I just let them play. I say art should be play. It's their own world. "It's your own paper. You do what you like." I remember, I went to an art opening of Tanya Broski. She was one of my students here. It was her first big show at the Department of Transportation, around the early 2000's, 2000, 2001 or so.

Her grandfather pulls out a little picture of her, “Look we were teaching her how to draw when she was three.”

I opened my purse, and I pull out a little picture of little granddaughter, Hope. I was teaching her when she was eighteen months old. As a matter of fact, that first time, we were at the church; they have little toys and stuff. She found a couple of brushes. She was holding them in that hand so tight; she wouldn't let go. I was carrying her around, showing my little granddaughter to everybody.

When we got home, her daddy needed to work on my computer downstairs, so I said, “Okay, do you want to go and see what Daddy does?” She didn't speak yet, but she understood everything. She nodded, and we went down there. Her big blue or hazel eyes are gorgeous. She would just stare at everything. “Do you want to paint?” I picked up the brush, and she nodded. So, I put some paper on the carpet and some watercolors and a little water, and I said, do this and do that. You wouldn't believe it. Not only did she paint, but she didn't spill a drop of water anywhere.

Esarey: She concentrated.

Lang: Yes. She was just in her own little world. And grandson, Cole, was just as excited when he started out, but he's the typical boy, impatient. He would just splash his colors as fast as he could, “Okay, next paper.” (chuckles)

Esarey: A little boy, little boy stuff. These are?

Lang: Something of my life.

Esarey: This is your life.

Lang: Yes. We start with the “Proposal.” These were created in 1999. They're acrylic on canvas. George is floating about, carrying the flowers, giving them to the mermaid from the island of Crete. I also have the “Vows,” our wedding picture, in my own way, and “The Journey to America.” We're going west on a bull, just like Zeus kidnapped Europa. He turned himself into a bull. And this is called “The First Blessing,” when our son was born in Moses Lake, Washington. George is wearing his uniform in the hospital. He came to see me in the hospital, because he was working there. He was still wearing his white pharmacist uniform. And there are my parents, in the background, sort of watching us and blessing us, and a little Greek church. I love those Greek churches. They have so much character.

Esarey: And they show up in different ways in your paintings.

- Lang: The same year, I created “The Second Blessing.” My son is in my arms, and I’m sitting on a rock, but we are in Montgomery, Alabama. George is coming towards me. Behind him, is the tree of knowledge again. Below him, you can see the Ku Klux Klan and the fire, right there.
- Esarey: Oh my, yes you can. I didn’t notice it until you pointed it out to me.
- Lang: But it’s a happy event. Here we have a fiddler on the roof, and my little Johnny is sitting by my feet, holding his ball.
- Esarey: You did this in 1999, but this was twenty years before.
- Lang: Yes, there’s another angel, to bless the event. Also I did it for the show I had at Gallery 33, here in Springfield.
- Esarey: Is it your gallery?
- Lang: No, no. I showed there. I created a series of works about the creation of the world, according to Sonia, of course. This is day five. It’s full of color, and angels, and fish jumping out of the water.
- Esarey: According to Sonia.
- Lang: According to Sonia, all the time.
- Esarey: Did you have all seven days?
- Lang: Just one left, there’s no room for everything.
- Esarey: And who is this?
- Lang: One of the students, there at Owen Marsh. That was back in 1992. I was helping out with Project Scope, and I was doing a lot of art. The student posed for me. I was working with clay, and the kids just love to watch the process. I went back and forth. Miss Jefferson’s first and second graders talked about art. We did art together any chance I get.
- Esarey: You worked with children all these years.
- Lang: All the time. Downstairs, at schools, any place. Here I’m at the house, in front of the painting called “The Street of Dreams.” It was created in 2003, acrylic on canvas. I was listening to the Manos Hatzidakis album, with the same title, about a Greek neighborhood. There are some free-floating characters here in spring time, 2006. They’re just happy pictures.
- Esarey: Do you have other members of your family that paint?

Lang: On my mother's side of the family, one of her relatives, I remember as a little child, did paintings, so I used to see that. These are some of the recent colors. This is me standing in front of some of those paintings in March through April 27, at Prairie Arts Alliance. I was one of the featured artists. It's called "Cycles of Life."



Sonia, with several pieces of her art at the Prairie Art Alliance – "Cycles of Life," Springfield, IL. 2007

This is an older picture of 2003. It's called "The Return," and that's me flying towards Crete. As a matter of fact, I'm over Crete, and I'm dressed like an ancient, Cretan goddess, although I'm totally covered. Remember they were topless in those days, ahem, ahem.

Esarey: No, I didn't know that. (laughs)

Lang: Well, anyway, there's art in every season.

Esarey: Naturally, you would do it your own way.

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: And we're looking at some family pictures?

Lang: Some family photos. This is in 1987, the four of us.

Esarey: Leo, George, Sonia and John. What do your children feel about all the tradition that you have taught them about Greece?

Lang: Oh, they enjoy it, especially the cooking that comes with it. They love the special dishes we do for holidays.

Esarey: Have they been to Greece too?

Lang: Yes, of course. Remember, when they were little, they spent three years there. Then, we went back again a few times. But they have forgotten their Greek. They understand it, but they don't speak it anymore. The kids made too much fun of them, when we came back at school, you know.

This is another picture in 1988, during the State Fair. It looks like Papa Bush is visiting, and there's our priest's wife, Filia. She's leading him there. I'm behind the screen, ready to serve him a plate of Greek gyros.

Esarey: This is George H. W. Bush?

Lang: Yes.

Esarey: Did you actually serve it to him?

Lang: Yes, and he greeted me politely and chit-chatted for a minute or two. All these people behind me, in the booth, were secret police. But that was before September 11, so they were very discrete and not as many.

Our son, Leo, was married February 2, 1991, and the four of us are together, all dressed up for the occasion.

Esarey: Beautiful pictures.

Lang: And some from our daily life.

Esarey: Family life.

Lang: Fishing.

Esarey: This is an especially interesting picture.

Lang: Our little ballerina and little Boy Scout.

Esarey: He works at the Lincoln Library. We're looking at some family pictures here.

Lang: And Sonia is buried in the books again. This is something I've been doing the last couple of years or so, sending them to Greece and the relatives in the States.

This is our son and his special woman. She's a wonderful teacher and mother of three. They're not married yet, but I hope they do. She has brought a lot of new life to his life. Her name is Kathy Kennett. Our son, Leo, lives here in town with his wife, Sharon. There's *Yiayia*, [Grandma in Greek] with Cole.



Sonia at work in the Lincoln Public Library, Springfield, IL. 2010

Esarey: *Yiayia*?

Lang: And Papa, playing chess with Hope.

Esarey: Chess? Okay. And this is the garden right here?

Lang: He's working his garden and improving it every year.

Esarey: And you bring children down, to do art.

Lang: Oh, anybody, anybody, especially a few parents that are home-schooling. The kids are welcome to come here, now and then, and play.

Again, pictures from the studio, with the grandchildren, and the updated studio, and my favorite picture of Cole and Hope and the umbrella. It was taken back in 2008, when we were visiting Rantoul.

Esarey: These are all in Greek.

Lang: Well, in Greek, but there's a similar equivalent in English, similar. Except for this last one, where I'm dressed like Cleopatra.

Esarey: Well, you were talking about that. I think we saw some of that downstairs.

Lang: Yes, at the library.

Esarey: That's an excellent costume, by the way.

Lang: Here, I have a picture of me, finally going to the Pacific Ocean. Here's Hope with her daddy. In this picture, she's eleven. Here's Sharon, the wife of Leo, our little Cole—he's eight in this picture—and Nancy—she's the sister of George, Nancy Johnson.

George drove us all the way across the country last summer. It was fantastic. It's a beautiful country. Here we are at the Grand Canyon. When I took that picture, I remembered that I suffered from vertigo.

Esarey: Fear of heights?

Lang: Not fear of heights, just vertigo. I have an inner ear problem or something that's affected me. So, I started backing up. (laughs)

Esarey: Yeah, you don't want to get—

Lang: And this is our son, in front of his car. He purchased it here in 1999. At the time, last year—well, that's in kilometers. But, he's reached 400,000 miles this year.

Esarey: What kind of car is that?

Lang: It's a... Oh gosh, George would know.

Esarey: It's an incredible car, whatever it is.

Lang: Well, he just changed the interior and, excuse me. George, what was John's car? (Answer, Ford) It's a Ford... something to do with space.

George: It was a German made car, with a German engine and [inaudible].

Esarey: It's quite amazing, actually.

Lang: But it was a fantastic trip. You were interested in the *House & Garden* magazine, which is a Greek magazine that featured the most beautiful Cretan homes. My cousin, George Lambrakis, restored my grandparent's home. His parents had inherited it, and he grew up there. Of course, eventually he moved back into the city to complete his studies. Finally, he went back there and said it was kind of neglected for twenty years, because it was closed up. But he restored it to its beauty. It was built in the 1800's.

Esarey: The restoration pictures are stunning.

Lang: He did a lot of work by hand, himself. This is the exterior of the place, close to the Church of the Holy Belt of the Virgin Mary. Inside, it is just fantastic. It has the same icons and floors that I remember when I was a child.

Esarey: So, it was done well.

Lang: What I noticed, while I was there, was that Saint John the Baptist had wings on him. I had never paid attention to that before. The priest explained to me that John the Baptist is between saints and angels, because he was the forerunner of Christ. So, I made sure I found me a small picture of St. John the Baptist, with wings. Now I have my own icon.

Esarey: Yes, you do, beautiful.

Lang: My cousin decided to convert the ground floor of the house into a small café, which did fine for a few years. Then, with the economy the way it is, apparently he closed it a couple of years ago. But he collected everything he could get his hands on.

A lot of people actually were throwing things away. They didn't know what to do with them. He says, "Give it to me to restore it and save it." So, that little place upstairs and downstairs is almost like a little museum now.

Esarey: Beautiful, absolutely stunning.

Lang: You can see it has the original oil lamp that was converted to electricity. That's the way I remember the lamps as a child, with the beautiful little beads hanging all over. He said that he sanded all the steps, all of those that were kind of messed up after twenty years of humidity. This is his father on the wall. He is mentioned in the article and my cousin's grandparents from the other side.

My cousin, who also is George, took me to the Monastery of Paliam, which is only a 15 to 20 minute drive from that house. To the left of this picture, here, you see the myrtle tree that grew around the icon of Virgin Mary. Many miracles have taken place here. As a matter of fact, Sue Monk Kidd got the inspiration for her book, "The Secret Life of Bees," and the Black Madonna, after visiting here. The monastery is mentioned in "Traveling with Pomegranates." You can see on the other picture below the original chapel that was built in the Virgin's honor. But, because of all the crowds, eventually they had to build a larger church in her honor. The nuns take care of everything there. When we were there, it was siesta time, so it was totally peaceful. (chuckles)

Esarey: It's beautiful. What we've done is finish a book of wonderful pictures.

Lang: I'm going to read a poem that has to do with my homesickness of Crete at times. It was written while I was in one of those long winters because, before we came to Illinois, we lived in New Mexico, where it's nice and warm and sunny 360 days of the year.

"Anxiety [title] Images tormented in solitude remain imprisoned in a sea shell. Subdued colors mediate the images among the green waves of tasseled corn. Thoughts are sailing on a ship, a gorgon's head for an anchor. On my lips you may taste the sand, the wind and the salty sea. Angels tread fields of thyme, far from the flute of the shepherd boy, illuminating the dreams of children. We were all warm, like children, once. I will study the silence of the stars, read the shadows of the moon, explore the possibility of color, argue with a lump of clay. The vesper bells keep silent in the darkness."

As you can see in the title of this collection of poems is "In the Shadows of the Moon."

Esarey: Thank you so much.

Lang: You're welcome.

(End of interview session #3)