Emita Dember Armi
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By Frances Lomas Feldman
at the latter's home in
Pasadena, California

Emita Armi has been a distinguished volunteer with both public and non-profit agency commissions and boards - Pasadena, Los Angeles, and national organizations. From the time of her arrival in the United States from Hitler-dominated Germany in 1937, she has been involved with a wide range of organizations in accordance with her philosophy of "giving something back to the community." Over these years she has seen changes in the structure of agency boards and witnessed the impact on them of societal and political emphases related to particular times. This interview describes the course of her activities as a volunteer and notes important modifications in volunteer roles with the passage of time.

FELDMAN: I'm interviewing Emita Armi about her experiences in the field of social welfare, what brought her into it, and some of the things she has done. Emita, why don't you start by telling us what you have done and why.

ARMI: I will start by saying that I was born into a family of predominantly physicists. My mother's family as well as my father's family had lost their quite considerable capital during the German inflation. I felt that somebody in the family should not study physics, which would have been quite comfortable, but should learn something about the workings of, let us say, the social and economic functioning of a nation. At the time, in Central Europe, universities offered such a course of study.

I started at the university in 1930, at the Universities of Dresden and Berlin. They had started a course of training for professional managers; assistants to these entrepreneur founders of small industrial enterprises that grew too big for them to handle. So, it trained people in administration, in financing, in law basics, and in the sociology and economics that confronted an industrial leaders. The territory was very politicized and

there was need for professionally trained people to support the entrepreneurs and stand by their views.

FELDMAN: This was in Germany?

ARMI: In Germany, but the same happened in Scandinavia, in Holland, in Switzerland, in Austria; Central Europe was really one unit in that respect. I may add that the university admissions exam, the Abitur after the gymnasium in Central Europe entitled you to go to any university within that area. So, I decided this is what I should do, because somebody should have an idea besides learning how to spend money. I finished something that was about the equivalent to an American bachelor's degree. Then I had enough of it. I couldn't quite accept the unscientific and somewhat illogical approach that these people had.

I decided that I would go back into natural science or some application of that. I started medical school and then Hitler came. My family had some Jewish, some non-Jewish members; they had inter-married, beginning about 1835 or 1840. The Jews in Germany and surrounding areas, under the pressure of Napoleon, had been given full citizen rights to all non-citizens like indentured peasants, Jews and people like that. They had the goal of becoming mainstream. And once they had mainstreamed, they did not, in a pluralistic way, separate themselves - neither the peasants nor the Jews, so they started to intermarry and assimilate. This is the kind of family it was. When Hitler came, all non-Aryans, as they were called, that is, with a fourth of Jewish ancestry, were deprived of their rights and legal standing. My father lost his job immediately, because he was in higher education, and Hitler - or in this case, Goebels, his propaganda man, was smart enough to know that the Nazi regime had to control the learning of the youth.

FELDMAN: In this case, who?

ARMI: Goebels, the propaganda minister. He was smart enough to know that you had to brainwash people to live in a dictatorship. If you had a free academic training, that couldn't happen. So, the professors - non-Aryans, as they were then called - were deprived of their jobs. My father was one of the first ones. I could have stayed, because I had a lower percentage of Jewish blood than my father did. My mother's family, although she also had a Jewish great grandfather, or something like that, had a smaller non-Aryan percentage. But I decided I would go with my parents, because I had learned enough theory of the state to want to escape from the dictatorship. The enemy was not just the anti-Semitism but dictatorship that took all the rule of law out of everybody's existence.

FELDMAN: When did you come to the United States?

ARMI: I came to the States in 1937.

FELDMAN: Were you married then?

ARMI: Yes. I had met my future husband in 1926 when we were teenagers, but we had no close relationship; we just belonged to a stratum of society where everybody knew each other. It was Dresden; the town where I was born and grew up had a very thin upper middle and upper class. People knew each other. So I left with my parents. My father got a position in Istanbul, and I went with my parents and there, very soon Edgar and I decided that we were going to get married. We did so in 1935, as a matter of fact in London. Then we lived in Paris. There we decided that war was inevitable.

FELDMAN: What was your husband doing?

ARMI: He was studying physics.

FELDMAN: He followed your family's tradition.

ARMI: Yes. Also, it was the fashionable thing to do at the time, if one had the brains, one became a physicist. So, he started in Munich. Then, at the bachelor's level he contracted tuberculosis and move to a sanitarium in Switzerland. When I married him, I decided if I get three happy years out of this union, I'll be lucky. We got 65, so……

FELDMAN: That's a pretty good record.

ARMI: (laughter) Yes, I was very happy about that, and I think he was too. We lived in Paris, and we knew it was no place to stay. The French, themselves, were very xenophobic. They did not accept any foreigners. All the two years we lived there, we managed to be invited to one French family house. Now, this in itself, to live as an expatriate, is something that's very unsatisfying; in a host country like France that doesn't like anybody but the French. As soon as my husband got better, we came to the United States.

FELDMAN: Did he have Jewish background, too?

ARMI: Yes, he too had some. The approach to the Central European Jews is different than it is here. They did not form an ethnic minority, but a religious one, if they so chose. Very many accepted baptism, although they did not necessarily deny their backgrounds. That wasn't in, either. So, he had – his father had Jewish heritage, and his mother was educated and raised in a French convent. The family, when they left Germany, went to France, and my mother-in-law was so happy. She had returned to la douc Frances, and thought that I was a hindrance to their assimilating in France. But, they overcame their objections. Then we managed to get to the United States in 1937. Edgar wanted a Ph.D., so we went to Cal Tech because Dr. Miliken was a colleague and friend of my father. He

slipped in there, really not knowing what an outstanding institution Cal Tech was. It was a very happy experience to come to California.

Californians are not all California born; they are essentially people from somewhere else. Mrs. Miliken knew me and used me as a tea-pourer and otherwise social assistant. I had a very easy life until people put a social conscience into me, saying, "You lazy bum, do something." I started working in the lab of the clinic auxiliary of the Huntington Memorial Hospital, a clinic that was founded and donated by a Kellogg heiress who was the fiancé of one of the Nobel Prize winners. It was a very chummy situation. Then, war broke out, and Edgar was recruited by the Air Force to do some research on vapor trails -- those tails that make wonderful targets for all missiles, even limited ones. As it turned out, he couldn't work. By the time that he got his Ph.D., they had reclassified that project and only citizens could work on it. We weren't naturalized, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service would not make one single exception. You had to be in the country five years, otherwise, no naturalization. They started naturalizing only members of the armed forces. We were one of the first non-members of the armed forces who were naturalized, and Edgar was going to be commissioned from civilian life. I bought a book on how to be an officer's wife, and I was all prepared. Then, they found out that Edgar had had tuberculosis and it was healed and he had a scar that every layman saw in the x-ray.

Edgar waited a year to be able to go to work as a citizen, and he taught physics at a small technical institute in Auburn, Alabama. They have a good football team, but not much else. After we were there six weeks, they dumped 800 officer candidates on that little school, and nobody was there to teach them algebra. They somehow found out I

could add two and two, and I got the title of instructor. It was the height of my career. I taught algebra and analytical geometry.

FELDMAN: Your husband's tuberculosis was a barrier to his coming into the United States?

ARMI: No, that we circumvented. But in the matter of being a commissioned as an officer rather than being able to work in highly classified projects, he could not pass the physical. For a while, he worked for the Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, with a little Lieutenant trailing him and signing off papers. He left because he thought there was a danger that he was frozen into his job. So, we left for Philadelphia, where he worked in industry and everything went fine from then on.

We had two babies, and after that, when I returned to California and to volunteering, and this time in the social work field. By then, I had understood that the socialized sector in this country is very different from Europe. This country doesn't have a developed and esteemed bureaucracy that you have in Central Europe. Social services are, to a large extent, provided by private, non-profit organizations. Fitting into the fact that I have two boys, I was recruited by the Girl Scouts.

FELDMAN: Is that ironic?

ARMI: Yes, the Girl Scouts of Los Angeles. This shows on my resume. That was my first social work job. I don't know why and how, but I was pushed into the financial end of it, and I developed records for financial planning.

FELDMAN: Do you think that was because you had a degree in business administration.

ARMI: Yes, and I have it, of course, - let us say my ability profile is mathematical, so this was a natural. But, the combination of the business administration and my basic approach to problems – for instance, I made financial forecasts, and they had a cookie drive, and the cookie drive gave a lot of cash. They invested this cash, but didn't know for how long they could invest. This was one of my problems, for instance.

When we came back to California, what else did I do? Yes, the Federation of Settlements approached me.

FELDMAN: That was in Los Angeles?

ARMI: Yes, in Los Angeles and there was a local Federation of Settlements. I worked as a board member in one of the settlements. Then I somehow enjoyed their national board. I stuck with them for a long time, because they also had, for me, an interesting aspect: mainly the help to immigrants. After all, we came as immigrants. They had developed a system of supporting immigrants. I must admit that I came as a rather well equipped immigrants, because I spoke English about as well as I do now, though with a little less vocabulary. Maybe we didn't have quite the needs that most immigrants have. But there were aspects that I thought that I could contribute. I enjoyed doing that.

Then started a series of changes in the structure of these social agencies in the Sixties, when the War on Poverty set new guidelines that were tied to involving the recipients of services in the decision-making process. That changed the character of the boards of these agencies.

FELDMAN: What did the Federation include? Which agencies? Do you remember?

The most successful board members that I've ever found were trained as board members, either by the Junior League – they made it their business – or they were trained

in decision-making in law school. As long as we had movements with training built in, like the Girl Scouts or the YWCAs and YMCAs, staff and decision volunteers were essential. You simply had to have the training or the general educational background to be able to function effectively in a group like a board.

I grew up, of course, in a much more highly socialized economy with a larger socialized sector in the capitalist society of Central Europe. But, it required one thing that we don't have in the United States, and that is training and a status-giving bureaucratic administration. In Europe, they are trained for what they are doing – academically trained in their leadership, and we don't have it. In England, they have it and always had. They had their cream of intelligent people - of young intelligence – go into their colonial service, and we don't.

FELDMAN: Do you see things you'd like to reform?

ARMI: I don't think there is very much that fundamentally needs changing in this country. I think the basics – you see, we really, here in this country, believe in the book, and we hate to change the rules and regulations and our traditions. I don't think there's much hope of developing a good bureaucracy. For instance, I grew up in a country with socialized medicine. It was pushed by the military and the industrialists. My grandfather was one of the latter on a parliamentary committee on accident prevention in factories. They knew that they needed lots of healthy soldiers, lots of healthy workers. So, in enlightened self-interest, they put pressure on their government to finance it.

FELDMAN: Let me ask you about some of your awards. I know that you were the recipient of the CSWA's George Nickel Award for distinguished Service as a volunteer. Will you name some of the others you've received?

ARMI: Yes, I have had the United Way Leadership Award…two, in fact. One I'm particularly proud of – though not as much as of the Nickel Award, but one from the Volunteer Center of Los Angeles. I was their treasurer and I made treasurer's reports palatable and humorous and acceptable.

FELDMAN: That's very nice. I recall being on that board when the award was conferred.

ARMI: In addition, I have some others. Do you know where I keep them?

FELDMAN: Where?

ARMI: In the back of my closet where I have my good clothes. I don't have to show them off. But I like to look at them.

FELDMAN: We all viewed your contributions as constructive. Well, I thank you very much, Emita. I think you've had unique experience as a volunteer in public and private organizations.

ARMI: Yes, I think I had – maybe it was ability or background – I tried to apply the scientific approach to the problems of administration. Mainly, I looked at the problem and said, "Why is it a problem and what are the rules or laws that govern this area that we are having problems with?" It has helped me to clarify things.

FELDMAN: It also helps the other people on the board to be clear about how to change.

ARMI: You see, most social workers have gone through a rigorous training in casework – case – an isolated problems. All they have to govern them are the rules that they are given. Social workers, by and large, are not analyzers. They are applying rules that govern and are trained to recognize the human needs and see how they can be applied. I would not have made a good social worker.

FELDMAN: That's hard to know. There are many social workers who also do respect the formulation and application of policy.

ARMI: Oh, yes, yes, but good policy. I was always willing to formulate policies. Of course, I came equipped to analyze through my background, my scientific background, but also, there was a family tradition of saying you can be as unconventional as you want to be and as original as you dare behind a facade of conventionality.

FELDMAN: You made a contribution. I think that's very important.

ARMI: I would like to come back to your question of why I volunteered, where I volunteered in the social work field, and what I feel were my specific contributions. Let me start with the Girl Scouts. My contact was a little unconventional, having two sons. They, or better, their program director (Eva Rainman-Schindler), recruited me on the basis of a social contact (she was the daughter of our physician, Dr. Schiff). She knew about my interest in the functioning of an administrative entity, be it created to provide a consumer product or to try to contribute to character formation. I developed some tools for their financial reporting and cash flow forecasting and, based on my experiences of my youth in a stratified society, could give advice in the area of problems with broad integration of branches in the San Fernando Valley and the City.

My next volunteer activity was with the Settlement Movement, first with a local settlement center, then later, the state and national federation as board volunteer and officer. The Settlement Movement attracted me, in fact, because of the thrust toward helping the immigrant community towards integration through education and community organization. After World War II and on through the War on Poverty in the Sixties, they applied their methods and philosophy also to the migration of southern black agrarian

voters to the industrial North. Towards the end of my activities with the settlements, I drifted towards analysis and the role of systems as a power tool in the administration of a social work agency.

A period of bylaws writing for several agencies followed – usually as a board member, in combination with some financial controls or forecasting responsibility. At the Pasadena YWCA, for example, I take credit for by laws that eliminated a cliquish, self-perpetuating board by codifying a nominating committee, partly, and the board completely elected by the total membership.

During my activities at the Volunteer Center, the board was gender-integrated and I earned a special award for humorous treasurer's reports, with board interaction. During my tenure on the Family Service board, my input was focused on the relative powers of decision-making of the volunteer and staff structures as well as the definition of the fundraising function of the agency. I also focused on the definition of the fundraising functions of the agency in regards to board eligibility.

Before, in my old age, I retired to less demanding activities on advisory boards, let me mention one in particular; my functioning as the nominated president of the Mayor's Council on Voluntarism. This was an experiment that the then-mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, established for the purpose of strengthening volunteer involvement and community participation in the public sector of governmental bodies, as well as private corporations for profit and non-profit. The experiment was terminated after a few years, because it became a tool of political partisanship.

The changes I observed during the last 40 years were many-fold and quite fundamental. Most boards of social agencies had been, except for women's

organizations, male dominated, consisting of described established service-oriented community leaders. It was prestigious and gave status to be on a service-oriented organization board, especially one that was movement-related, like the Girl or Boy Scouts, the 'Y,' or settlements. I see four main reasons for the changes beginning in the Sixties: 1) the role of women in society; 2) the War on Poverty and its consequences; 3) the change of the role and influence of professional staff – fundraising issues versus decision-making; and 4) training for board members.

Let me finish with a dream. I dreamed I sat in back of a gathering that turned out to be a closed-coffin funeral – as a matter of act, it was MY funeral that I seemingly could not keep from checking up on. As eulogies went on, I became bored and woke up. Of all eulogies I could only remember one voice: "She was a constructive irritant." Was this possibly a phrase out of my sub-conscious?

FELDMAN: I'm not sure that from the standpoint of the CSWA that is valid – except for the constructive part! Thank you, Emita, for your time and recollections.

ARMI: Thank YOU.