

Agnus Mattica
(Long-time Staff Member and
Retired Executive Director, International Institute)

Interview Conducted by: Henry Talbert
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HENRY TALBERT: Agnes Mattica, former long-time executive director of International Institute of Los Angeles. We're conversing now. It's the morning of July the 14th, so we will proceed with our conversation with Mrs. Mattica. Interview conducted by Henry Talbert with Mrs. Agnes Mattica. We heard that you would consent to have some discussion with us, because of its significance of the institute. Obviously we're always interested in what led you into the profession and ultimately into International Institute.

AGNES MATTICA: I hope this doesn't sound arrogant, but I think I was born that way, because from college on, it was always important for me to bring people together and find solutions and create close relationships with people. Then actually in Hungary I majored in English German, so when I came to the United States as a brand new immigrant refugee, then somehow by chance, I found out that there was an opening at the International Institute in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I didn't have any kind of training, but they needed a Hungarian case worker, and I was roaring to go. I was also very lonely, and I think back it had something to do with my need to work with people and be useful. So that's how I came here. That's how it started.

HENRY TALBERT: And of course that led you into all of the intricacies of the institute, and what was involved in that, which or what are some of the positions you've held in social work? You've had quite a career.

AGNES MATTICA: Well I started out as a case worker, and then eventually I became supervisor, then I became assistant director, then I became executive director. The last was the relatively shortest period of time, it was like 3 years *.

HENRY TALBERT: The nature of the institute which was part of a national operation I guess projected you into quite a few relationships which normally a person working right here in Los Angeles would not have had.

AGNES MATTICA: Quite possibly so, although at the time I'm sure I thought that that's how life is, thinking very naturally, but especially during the earliest years, International Institute was truly international and home to many, many different ethnic groups. As far as I know, it really

was the only agency which in the 20s and 30s of course, and 40s before I came, but even later recognized the importance of culture in the development of human beings, and the need for respecting culture and worked from this premise in aiding the acculturation of people to the United States. That I believe was one of the reasons why we were so successful and had been so effective in assisting people to why they obtained their identity to really become part of the mainstream. I think that is one of the things that is most gratifying to me, and I met everybody I think in social work who was working with different ethnic groups and also in English, because that of course as you know was a very important aspect of the International Institute's work, and there again you could also find this.

HENRY TALBERT:I can remember as being on the board at the time you're arranging a meeting out over at USC that people can * social work, which was a rather interesting luncheon we had that day.

AGNES MATTICA: Can you refresh my memory, I don't remember that at all.

HENRY TALBERT:Remember we were trying to develop some programs with the school of social work related to preparing people to work with the industry.

AGNES MATTICA: Oh yes, I remember now, and I also remember that I prepared some papers and also did some workshops at SC for first and second-year students in the school of social work that have to do with culture and especially with refugee adjustment, because we through experience learned something about the dynamics of acculturation for traumatized refugees and how that worked in the community, and we were happy to share that.

HENRY TALBERT:I also remember under your leadership where we had as we were doing our planning for the next year or even longer than that, you had enlisted * some professors I think from SC and from UCLA to sit on our planning group. These things come back to mind when I look at you.

AGNES MATTICA: Ah yes. That I didn't remember at all. Well thank you for reminding me of these links.

HENRY TALBERT:Well they become very important now as I look at this archives work and what we're trying to do, because we trying to pull nuggets of information that have had some impact. Now do you from where you sat then and where you look back upon now, do you see any significant contributions the institute made to social welfare generally in California?

AGNES MATTICA: I should certainly think so and hope so. I need to go back to what I was saying earlier, because I think that the greatest contributions came in helping to make people self sufficient, and since in those prehistoric days where one didn't get government assistance and our only source of income was United Way and * , we had mostly United Way and very little * , we had a lot of freedom to experience and to use our time creatively and do maybe spend ½ an hour with 1 person and 8 months with another person to help them become self sufficient. I think that maybe the greatest contribution aside from helping people become contributing members of society and maintaining their dignity and sense of self worth that International Institute helped other agencies in the community at large to begin to look at culture beyond just festivals where people took on their nice costume and dance around then everybody applauds them, and then ½ an hour later they expect them to be totally like everybody else, so that one of the things that I think International Institute tried to do and was hopefully also successful in doing is to talk about culture as something that is not as differentiate but an enriching kind of cultural differences, aspects, and to alert social workers to the importance of giving recognition to these * and to learn to work with them.

HENRY TALBERT: **In doing that, did you encounter any obstacles or people vague about certainly people from other cultures and other countries, but could they see the social work hand at moving around in their behalf?**

AGNES MATTICA: Are you talking about the community, or are you talking about the clientele?

HENRY TALBERT: **Probably the clientele to start with, coming from so many different parts of the world.**

AGNES MATTICA: Well in terms of the clientele, the answer is both yes and no, because social work as a profession did not exist in the European countries or in Latin American countries where most of the people I ever worked with came from. I remember early in my career when I was telling my supervisor that I was going to spend X amount of time at X client's house because I had to be there for lunch or dinner or whatever, and she was explaining to me not having graduated in this country that social workers don't do that, that there is an interview and it's formal and they did this and did that. I told her well that's fine, but if I'm going to do this, I will never be able to go to her house again, because if I refuse the need, then the bond is broken. Now you can call it anything you want to, but that's supposed to happen, and because she was very bright and very responsive individual, she listened and heard it and let me do what I needed to do, but many of my clients who have made tremendous amount of progress, which I think they might not have made without the invention of the International Institute very often thought of us as the nice lady who speaks their language with a friend who is like a sister to whom you can talk about anything and she's not going to be angry, and we will help you. Maybe 10 years later or 20

years later, we might have come back and said hey, I'm now aware of something that I wasn't aware of.

HENRY TALBERT: Now extending this question within the state, I know there's an institute in the Bay area?

AGNES MATTICA: Actually there is one in Oakland and there is one in San Francisco. They are of course California's ethnic diversity is assisting the lost too, so there are pretty much doing the same thing as we in terms of social work precepts, but I found that every International Institute that I have known is in some way different determined by both their staff and the ethnicities they work with and the power structures in the community with which they have to work, and so on.

HENRY TALBERT: Just speculating, because we're both removed from the institute and to a certain extent from formal social worker activities, could you see a unique service that the institute or a comparable type agency could offer California now in the midst of all this discussion about immigration, cultural diversity, and the whole economic situation?

AGNES MATTICA: I'm going to reveal my biases now, because yes the answer is yes, but I don't know whether everything that I would consider wise is also politically correct. To me, adjustments of the acculturations are too wasted, and I do not quite agree with this who say that it is very healthy for newcomers to be so given so much freedom to retain or be within their own culture that they do not have to make any adjustments to the people around them. I don't think life works that way, I don't think it ever will, and that eventually people always get there. They either make it or they don't make it, and I'm sure that none of us can be so arrogant as to assume that if we didn't exist the whole world would come apart, but I do believe that we can make some difference. One of the differences we can make is with love and affection and understanding to tell people what reality is, and what is expected of them, and what accountability they have so that they do not use ethnicity as a shield which then also becomes very often a shield of anger when things don't work well.

HENRY TALBERT: Or a crutch to excuse incompetencies. This is great, maybe this will give a boost to institute-type programs in the state.

AGNES MATTICA: Well I've occasionally been called a traitor for my cause, because when a refugee stated to come, either Chinese or * , and I was on various planning commissions with other social agencies and government-supported, and so on, I was then saying that I did not feel that giving total welfare at this point was helpful to people whose whole identity was tied to their working the role in the family, for instance in the Chinese. One really didn't need to be a genius to see that when people did not get jobs and maybe only the women work and the father had no

role left, then the whole family disintegrated. Maybe that was the only way that that many people to handle the problem, but I think that in our eagerness to be supportive, that sometimes we as the professions went overboard and diminished the importance of self sufficiency and accountability.

HENRY TALBERT:I suppose you had various platforms through conferences and speeches to espouse some of these concepts?

AGNES MATTICA: Well * a coward, I'm not sure I would get up in front of my peers and say these things, but no certainly not now in my private life. I do a lot of volunteering, but not along these lines. Oh but, is it Ok if I just go on and on? You'll stop me when you need to talk....

HENRY TALBERT:Oh yes I will or the tape will.

AGNES MATTICA:That one of the things where International Institute played a really significant * was in the development of social legislation, immigration legislation pertaining to quote foreign aliens refugees, or whatever you want to call them, because we were active in consultants to many, many government panels and planning mechanisms and so on and had opportunity to give a lot of input and that interest was really well received.

HENRY TALBERT:From my understanding, the institute had say in the community of social welfare agencies here, United Way each year is never enough, but I think they dealt as fairly with international students as they did with other organizations, which in a sense I guess was endorsement.

AGNES MATTICA: Is that a statement or a question?

HENRY TALBERT:I think it's a statement. It may sound questionable to you, but I'm thinking of the status of the institute.

AGNES MATTICA: Yes, I think the institute was recognized. As you know when it comes to money, one never feels that one gets as much as one deserves, but certainly I think they recognize that we were important they are seeing the field, and that they road that we play with immigrants in terms of both * assistance and counseling is out of the question.

HENRY TALBERT:Are there any significant differences you see in social work as practiced and now social welfare as it gets to the people in contrast to when you were at the height of your activity with the institute, do you see any significant trends or changes?

AGNES MATTICA: I think so. I think that one of the changes that I alluded to was where one got one's funding and what kind of strings or were attached to the funding. With United Way, there were hardly any other than accountability you know, and United Way just usually had worked really strong. Once one's major source of income in from government, I think the whole ball game changes, not only because you have to spend so much time on meeting minute details and requirements, but also that one tends to the focus of the once work is determined very often by where the money is. So when there is something that is in whether it's drugs or immigration or community organization, then that's where you're going to go get your proposals for funding, and I'm not saying that this is dishonest or wrong, because certainly as far as I know, we have never applied for anything that we didn't believe in, but maybe the mix of where one's effort would not have been quite the same. The priorities would not have been quite the same had somebody just said here is the money, use it to the best of your ability in the most creative way.

HENRY TALBERT: That seems to be very true that often the program follows money whether the money coming is a result of the program.

AGNES MATTICA: When we had United Way funds, we were able to use it in preventive programs very often, and I don't think that one needs to elaborate why that is more effective than getting a family after it has become totally dysfunctional regardless how much money you have at that point or how many programs you can offer them. Lots of preventive services at least as I saw it happening for something that I really * .

HENRY TALBERT: Well as you look ahead, what would seem to be the prognosis for social welfare, or do you see us playing a more prominent role? Or do you see people just taking this for granted as they've done, those who are really are skeptical about it at least take us for granted.

AGNES MATTICA: I'm not very good about prognosticating, but I would think that leaders in social work and social sciences and social planning has become so much the fabric of life here that practitioners and certainly the outstanding people in the field I think are part of government, are part of everybody's thinking. One just hopes that their input is wise and not just politically popular, but I would think with so many well-trained and well-meaning people hopefully something will emerge which it better does because as I see the world, we are not getting any better either in the United States or in other countries, we are not learning to live with each other better. We are not learning to be with our conflicts better. We are not getting better education. We are in a mess, so I hope that there will be some brilliant people who can not only point a direction, but get support for some kind of thinking and programs that helps to prevent some of the great difficulties this country is facing.

HENRY TALBERT: Well it would appear that knowing how many hundreds of persons who have passed through the doors of the institute even while you were there, who knows maybe 1 or 2 of those persons will wind up, as I think some have...

AGNES MATTICA: Oh, some indeed have. I know of several of our ex-clients who became social workers who are teaching social work, who are planners in Washington and Sacramento and doing a good job, really doing a very, very good job. I once remember, and I think this was actually played well, it was the greatest compliments that I ever got and certainly one that I remember where one of I had this case where I supervising * and one of our staff went to work for the county as a social worker, and I asked her how the interview went or what happened, something like that, and she said he hardly asked me anything. They said if I came from the International Institute then I'm well trained. So that was a lovely thing to say.

HENRY TALBERT: One of the joys. Are there any things you were prepared to say that I haven't asked you during our discussion?

AGNES MATTICA: No, as always you ask the questions in such a marvelous way that it's easy to talk and probably say more than you want to hear, but no not really. One of the things that bothered me, and maybe it's because I don't have enough confidence in the world, is that we are becoming immigrants, we are becoming angry at each other, we are becoming angry at the different minorities. Everybody is looking at their rights and not enough talk about their responsibility. It worries me very much. That's all. But do you have answer, just to make me happy while the tape is still going?

HENRY TALBERT: Well, I think within some of the groups that you referred to, there is this growing consensus I know within the African American community, there is quite a bit of dialogue that isn't accepted by everyone about this business of rights and responsibilities and color, as I said earlier, as a crutch. I think more and more and just the very fact that some people who raise these issues get so much press now indicates that people are reading and listening too. I would say that and other some of the great social issues of the day, some ethnic groups are begging for more publicity. Take for example the Los Angeles riots a year or so ago, people said we were in there too. We didn't get credit for being forceful enough in pursuing our cause. Well this has serious implications, particularly when you think of ethnic groups trying to get some relationship. They're now saying that it's no more a melting pot, it's more like a salad bowl of people where they bring what they have there without as you said earlier in our discussion, without giving up everything that they hold dear, but yet releasing some of those things that lead to such pride and ultimately do not help bring about * mix in this nation. I know that when you left, you left a great deal of paperwork at the institute. You probably took some things home, or any of your

writings or any of your things that you're most welcome I'm encouraged to if you have some things that you'd like to put in the archives, we'd be most honored to accept them.

AGNES MATTICA: Thank you very much, and you mentioned that to me on the phone. Either those were missed because I'm leaving for Europe in a short time, and I get so much to do that I didn't look for that in the various boxes that I have stocked. But if it's still opportune in let's say in a month or 2, then after I've returned, I'd be so happy to look for and see what I might provide.

HENRY TALBERT: This will be wonderful, because this is an ongoing process. It's really just getting underway, so whenever you return, if you sneak in something about European social work, we'll include that too. Thank you so much. You've been most gracious, and we appreciate, this will be a worthwhile addition to the archives.

[End of recording]