



City of Alexandria
Office of Historic Alexandria
Alexandria Legacies
Oral History Program



Project Name: *Immigrant Alexandria: Past, Present and Future*

Title: *Interview with Barbara Lunati and Mia Lunati*

Date of Interview: *April 2, 2015*

Location of Interview: *Barbara Lunati's home in Alexandria, Virginia.*

Interviewer: *Krystyn Moon*

Transcriber: *Apasrin Suvanasai*

Abstract: Barbara Lunati was born in Germany in 1964 and has lived in Alexandria for the past eighteen years. During the interview she recalls her youth, her love for the outdoors, and meeting her husband. Upon her arrival, she explains her first impressions of Alexandria, Virginia and the various ways she has remained connected to her German heritage. In response to a life changing event, she explains her decision to become an adoptive parent and the course she has taken to incorporate her daughter's Chinese heritage in their home. Towards the latter part of the interview her daughter, Mia joins the conversation and recalls what her experiences have been learning about Chinese culture.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and may not reflect the audio-recording exactly.

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INTRODUCTIONS	
Krystyn Moon	This is Krystyn Moon and I'm doing another interview for the Immigrant Alexandria Project on April 2, 2015 and this is Barbara Lunati who has agreed to interview and talk to us about her life here in Alexandria but, also more importantly perhaps, also her daughter Mia who will be joining us in a little bit. First let's talk a little bit about your background and life in Germany growing up. Can you talk a little bit about when and where you were born in Germany? What it was like as a child?
Barbara Lunati	So, I was born in Germany in 1964 and I grew up in a small town near Aschaffenburg, which is about half an hour from Frankfurt.
CHILDHOOD 00:45	
KM:	Okay. And, what did you like to do as a kid?
Barbara Lunati	I was always a big outdoor person. So, I used to bike, hike, roller blade, sled, and play outside with my friends, lots of stuff. My mom used to say you know, "if it rains more than twenty-four hours you put on your rubber boots and go outside anyway."
KM:	[Both laugh] Yeah.
SCHOOL 01:09	
KM:	That's great. And, what was school like?
Barbara Lunati	Uhm, school was good [both laugh.] Yeah, I went to an all-girl's school. It was pretty strict and it was also pretty difficult.
KM:	Okay, was it a public school or private school?
Barbara Lunati	It was a public school but, I went to college later in the United States and compared to that, I actually felt that school was way more difficult. Of course, I was a child then. I was a little more mature later, right?
FAMILY & HOME LIFE 01:36	
KM:	[Laughs] Yeah, great. Can you talk a little bit about your family? Do you have siblings or—?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah. So, I have one brother that's five years older. He is an electrical engineer now and still lives in Germany.
KM:	Great. In your house, did you live with multiple generations?

Barbara Lunati:	Yeah, we did. So, it was my parents, my brother, and my maternal grandparents.
PARENTS 02:00	
KM:	Okay, and did both your parents work?
Barbara Lunati	Yes. My mother was a seamstress and worked part-time like, two-thirds of a day and my father painted houses.
KM:	Okay, great.
Barbara Lunati	Actually, my mom was quite smart but, after the war my grandparents would have had to pay for her school and so, she couldn't afford to go to school.
KM:	Right. Is that why her parents lived with you too, because—?
Barbara Lunati	[Interrupts] Um, no. Because, it was very common to have two generations live in the same house.
FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES: Camping & Hiking 02:35	
KM:	Okay, cool. What's your favorite childhood memory?
Barbara Lunati	So, there's a couple really. We were members of a hiking club which was the big-thing when I grew up. I mean, we would go on these hiking trips every other weekend like, on Sundays. We had a nice little youth group there and it was just fun, hiking and hanging out with other kids. So, once a year we would do a camping trip with the youth group and it was fun but, uh—.
KM:	[Interrupts] What mountains did you hike? I'm just curious.
Barbara Lunati	I'm from the Spessart area, which is not really a mountain-mountain area. We weren't rock climbing or anything. It was more like, basically hiking around. And then, maybe once or twice a year they would go on a bigger trip into the mountains. You know, I went on a couple of those trips and they were fun. Also, I have really fond memories just hanging out with my friends—my two best girlfriends. That was nice.
KM:	Yeah. [Break]
YOUNG ADULTHOOD – Education & Work 03:46	
KM:	Now, going on to sort of your later teen years, did you go to a university in Germany?
Barbara Lunati	No, I did not go to a university in Germany but, I have a degree as a

	Foreign Language Correspondent in English.
KM:	Oh, okay.
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, I didn't go to college until I came to the United States. That's where I got a Master's Degree.
KM:	Okay, great. So, when you were around eighteen, were you working?
Barbara Lunati	No. So, I was originally always very interested in plants and animals, and I was going to go to school for plant and animal research. I had applied for it and I got accepted in Stuttgart but, that's two hours from my hometown and my mother was like, no, I want you to stay local. So, I turned down that school and just became a Medical Assistant.
KM:	Okay.
Barbara Lunati	In Germany, it's like a two-year apprenticeship. So, I did that and I stayed there for a total of five years. After that, I actually had a friend that was working for the United States Army and he helped me get a job with the United States Army. I worked there for five years and during that time I got my degree as a Foreign Language Correspondent. Then, I worked as a translator in my last position.
KM:	Okay, great.
Barbara Lunati	And, that's also where I met my husband.
KM:	[Both laugh] We'll talk about him soon, right?
YOUNG ADULTHOOD: Leisure 05:33	
KM:	What did you like to do as a young adult?
Barbara Lunati	So, I think I already mentioned—what I did in childhood transformed into adulthood. So, I continued to like hiking, biking, and skiing but, would also do the typical young adult stuff like, go to bars, nightclubs, parties—lots of fun parties. We would go on some fun trips like, ski trips—trips all over Europe. Go into cities like Paris or Munich.
KM:	[Laughs] That's cool.
Barbara Lunati	So, that was good.
KM:	Great. [Break]
MEETING HER HUSBAND & MARRIAGE 06:16	
KM:	So, you mentioned Chuck [Barbara's husband]. When and where did you meet him?
Barbara Lunati	So, I was working for the Army and I basically met him at work. It

	was in 1987 and he was Second Lieutenant. He had just come to Germany on his first assignment and we basically bumped into each other within like, a week.
KM:	And, he was in the Army too?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, he was a Second Lieutenant.
KM:	Okay. Then, you dated for a while and did you get married in Germany or in the United States?
Barbara Lunati	So, we were almost dating for three years before we got married because, it was kind of hard for me to—. I knew if I married him I would have to move to the United States. It was kind-of-hard for me to just pack up and move.
KM:	Yeah.
Barbara Lunati	So, we dated for almost three years and got married in Germany.
KM:	Did you get married in your hometown or—?
Barbara Lunati	In the [unintelligible] in Aschaffenburg and then, the church wedding was in my hometown.
KM:	Okay. So, you mentioned coming to the United States. Do you want to talk about what that process was like?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah. So, being married to an American citizen, it's pretty easy as a spouse to come to the United States. You're basically granted a Green Card. All you have to do is apply for it, fill out some paper work, get a medical exam, do an interview, and then you get your Green Card. So, that was pretty straightforward and easy.
KM:	Do you think it also helped that he was in the military too?
Barbara Lunati	I don't know. I mean, I don't know if there's a difference. I just know if you have a husband that's in the military, I think you can actually apply for citizenship faster than if you come over—.
KM:	[Interrupts] Like, married to a civilian?
Barbara Lunati	Mm-hmm. Actually, if you're married to any United States citizen, I think. So, I think the key thing is that you're married to a United States citizen.
KM:	Okay, great. [Break]

ARRIVING TO THE UNITED STATES (Alabama; New York; Colorado; and Virginia) 08:18	
KM:	Where did you first live in the United States?
Barbara Lunati	So, when we first got to the United States my husband was sent by the military to go to training for six months in Alabama. I joined him after two months so; I spent the first four months in Alabama.
KM:	Okay. Were you able to work there? What were your first impressions of the United States while in Alabama?
Barbara Lunati	[Laughs] Uhm, okay. So, I didn't even try to work because I knew we were only going to be there for four months. I always wanted to go to college and my husband was very encouraging so, he signed me up to take a quarter there—even before I got there. So, I hit the ground and a few days later I took my first college courses.
KM:	Okay. What school was it, Alabama or Auburn? Or—?
Barbara Lunati	It was a community college. It was just a local community college, just to take some electives.
KM:	Okay, great.
Barbara Lunati	My first impression, well—.
KM:	[Laughter]
Barbara Lunati	I'd say culture shock is an understatement [both laugh.]
KM:	Sure.
Barbara Lunati	Because, it's very rural there and you have to basically picture like, going down Route 1 [U.S. Highway Route 1]— south of Old Town — going towards Fort Belvoir [Army base.] There's like, Kmart, fast food restaurants, motels, and I like biking and walking. I mean, the infrastructure is not there.
KM:	Right.
Barbara Lunati	You have to drive everywhere and that was a big downer for me. The other thing was, I was not used to the food at the time. The bread was like Wonderbread and I'm coming from Germany with you know, big hearty whole wheat bread and sourdough stuff and so, I ended up baking my own bread for the first year or so. And, the beer was basically Bud light or —.
KM:	[Imposes] Like, water.

Barbara Lunati	[Both laugh] Yeah, not so good. Let's see, what else, oh! The coffee wasn't that great either. So, I wasn't too crazy about the coffee, and the sweets overall are much sweeter in the United States so, I couldn't handle the icing on the cakes. The cake itself was good, but the icing — I still can't really stand the icing. So, there was a big culture shock but, going to college was good and the people were extremely friendly. [both laugh] So, it was okay.
KM:	So, when did you move to Alexandria? Were you in other places and then you came to Alexandria?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, we moved around with my husband's military job. So, we were in New York [state] basically, while he was at Fort Drum [military base] and it was pretty rural. Then, we both went to Colorado to get our master's degrees at that time. His was paid through the military and I kind-of tagged along and got the same degree.
KM:	[Laughs] Awesome.
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, and Denver was pretty good but, when I came to Alexandria I felt like I had come home.
KM:	That's great. Where did you first live in Alexandria? What year did you end up moving to Alexandria?
Barbara Lunati	We moved to Alexandria in [the late 1990s] and we started out renting in ParkFairfax. I loved ParkFairfax so; we ended up buying a unit and spent a total of nine years in ParkFairfax. Then, we bought this house which is right around the corner and I have been living here for the last nine years.
KM:	Okay, great. When you first came to Alexandria were you able to work or did you continue to go to school?
Barbara Lunati	So, it was perfect timing because I had finished my master's degree and we moved. I had gotten hired straight out of school by a Texas based computer software company that was doing OR [Operations Research] type software. I accepted that position because I knew it would be difficult for me to find a position here. At that time I was not a United States citizen yet. I couldn't get security clearance and a lot of the Operation Research jobs required security clearance.
KM:	Right, and you have to be an American so—.
Barbara Lunati	Exactly. So, I decided to take that job with the computer software company which made me travel all over the place — It was good. I did that for five years.

KM:	[Break]
FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ALEXANDRIA 13:13	
KM:	What were your first impressions of Alexandria?
Barbara Lunati	So, when we came to Alexandria I immediately fell in love with it. It's wonderful. It's very historic. I can do a lot of the things I used to be able to do in Germany like, I can bike. I can walk. I can hike. You know, it's very cultured. It has a lot of history. I love Old Town, it's just great.
KM:	Are there any particular places or people that you remember early on that made a difference?
Barbara Lunati	Overall, in the United States I've met some really nice people and we've made some good friends. Unfortunately, in the United States and especially here people are moving so much. So, you make friends and you lose friends and I'm not used to that. I mean, I grew up in an area where barely anybody ever moved and —.
KM:	[Interrupts] Me too.
Barbara Lunati	And, I've had a lot of girlfriends so, that is kind of hard. But, the first nine years we lived in ParkFairfax was wonderful. ParkFairfax is a special place in my heart; we've had some great neighbors. We have great neighbors here too and we're still very much connected with ParkFairfax — we still have a unit there that we are renting out. We go to the pool in the summer and go to concerts. So, ParkFairfax has a special place in my heart.
KM:	Great, great. [Break]
PROCESS OF ADOPTING MIA 14:55	
KM:	Can you describe the decision making process to adopt Mia?
Barbara Lunati	[Both laugh] Uhm, yes. So, when I came to the United States I was very energetic and I was driven to get a college degree. I wanted to be successful at work and I was advancing very well. We were renovating our place in ParkFairfax and we were basically living the American dream. Life was good and I was still working for the software company, travelling all over the place. Then, September 11 th 2001 [unintelligible] and Chuck was in the Pentagon and [starts crying] I was in an airplane [pause] on my way to Boston to a customer and—.
KM:	[Imposes] You were scared?

Barbara Lunati	Well, I was flying over the World Trade Center--seeing the burning World Trade Center and I [the plane] landed. I heard that there had been an attack on the Pentagon [pause] and it kind of made us rethink the whole purpose of life. You know, it's crazy just to work like crazy and — [pause] so; we kind of looked at ourselves and said, what's the purpose in life? We said, family is more important than all the money in the world and you really only live once. So, it kind of changed our outlook on life. I applied for United States citizenship so that I could possibly get a position here. Then, by 2002 we had a really good friend that was in the process of adopting from China. So, she was telling me about the process and I was like, this is the perfect solution for us. We went through the process and we adopted Mia from China. [stops crying]
KM:	Great. How long did it take to adopt Mia?
Barbara Lunati	So, it took fifteen months pretty much exactly from the time we started the paperwork until we travelled to China to pick her up.
KM:	Okay.
Barbara Lunati	She was thirteen months [old].
KM:	She was thirteen months? What was it like when you went to China? I presume it was your first time there.
Barbara Lunati	Yes, it was good. It was nice, I liked it. It was a great experience; we got to do some sightseeing. I wish we would have seen a little more nature because I think there's some beautiful nature in China. We definitely want to do that when we take Mia back, next time.
BALANCING DIFRERENT CULTURES AT HOME 18:33	
KM:	Can you talk a little bit about heritage? She's from China, you're from Germany. How do you balance the connections between her Chinese heritage and your German one? Sort of, make sure she gets the best of both.
Barbara Lunati	Uh-hm. Well, in our house — as my husband would probably confirm to you — [both laugh] the German culture is definitely the predominant one. So, he's trying to get his fair share in and Mia's trying too [both laugh.]
KM:	He's Italian-American right? Lunati?
Barbara Lunati	That's true. But actually, he was adopted by his stepfather.
KM:	Oh, I didn't know that.

Barbara Lunati	He's a mix of a little bit of everything but, the largest share is probably German.
KM:	[Laughs] Oh okay, that's great.
Barbara Lunati	Yes. So, we have some Chinese friends, actually one of them is coming to visit us tomorrow.
KM:	Oh, great. Yeah, that's right.
Barbara Lunati	So, Mia gets a lot of hands on experience from other Chinese families. We cook with them and we also cook German stuff so, it's pretty mixed.
KM:	Great.
Barbara Lunati	She gets a little bit of everything. Oh yeah, I forgot. She also has taken Chinese in school — an after school program.
KM:	In Elementary, right?
Barbara Lunati	In Elementary. Now, she's in middle school and she's taking Chinese there. So yeah, there is exposure.
KM:	Excellent. And now, is there also a support network for adoptive parents in this area?
Barbara Lunati	There is actually, and we're still in touch with the group that we traveled to China with but, for the most part we have really gone more of the unofficial route with having some Chinese friends. We have some friends that have children that are adopted from China.
KM:	Great. [Break]
ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY AND STAYING CONNECTED WITH GERMANY 20:33	
KM:	Let's talk about other things in terms of Alexandria. Is there a sizeable German community here? How do you stay connected with Germany, your family and other Germans here?
Barbara Lunati	Ok, so there are definitely a lot of Germans living in the Alexandria area and I certainly have a few German friends but, not all of my friends are German. It's easy to stay in touch with Germany now. I watch German TV online, Mia watches German TV online, there's skype, there's email. I'm trying to fly back whenever I can. It varies, I've had years when I flew back several times and then breaks in between two, three years. So, I mean, it is much easier to be connected now. When I first got to the states, twenty-four years ago,

	phone calls were extremely expensive and like, with my friends, I would send them Christmas letters once a year. That was the level of connection. Now it's easy and it helps.
KM:	And it's cheap and affordable.
Barbara Lunati	Yes, exactly. So that's wonderful, it really helps me stay much better connected.
KM:	And, you mentioned food — making food with Mia. Can you talk a little bit about making food at home and what you like to make?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah. So, I just love to cook period--international. So, I cook some German food but, I cook just as much Asian food or Italian food. There are a couple of things that I like to make. Like, I make a really good red cabbage with some German dumplings in a roast. Mia's favorite is making Wiener Schnitzel.
KM:	Oh, cool.
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, and she helps me with that. So, I mean if it was up to her she would eat it once a week [both laugh.] So, yeah, we cook a lot and we bake a lot too. We make a mix of American and German goods.
KM:	Are you baking bread like you did in Alabama?
Barbara Lunati	No, I'm not baking bread anymore because there's fantastic bread you can buy anywhere now. Great Harvest, for example is a great place or Best Buns. So, there is no need to make bread but, we still make our fair share of cookies and cakes.
KM:	Excellent. Do you speak German at home with Mia and Chuck?
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, I basically always speak German with Mia. Chuck, you know, he can understand just about anything but, he's a terrible — [both laugh] He's not so good with speaking it. It's usually quite funny when we sit together because Mia and I will speak German, Chuck will chime in - in English, and I will speak English with him. But, it's all automatic so, we don't even think much about it anymore.
KM:	Why do you think speaking German — particularly at home — is important?
Barbara Lunati	Well, first of all I wanted to give Mia the gift of a second language and the only other language I know is German [both laugh] so, it's either that or nothing.
KM:	[Laughs]
Barbara Lunati	It helps me too, to stay fluent. And, of course, whenever we go back

	to visit she can talk to my relatives and our friends. So, it's fun and she likes it as well.
KM:	That's cool. What other things do you do to stay connected? You mentioned travel. Do you also celebrate holidays in a certain way? Do you perhaps play certain sports? Root for sports teams? Anything like that?
Barbara Lunati	So in terms of doing other things, like holidays. You know, my husband and I are both Catholic so actually, most of the holidays are pretty much similar. We do celebrate Thanksgiving and actually, I'm very fond of Thanksgiving because of the food and it brings family together. That to me is much more important than presents, for example. Then around Christmas, Germans usually don't put out the Christmas tree until Christmas Eve but, they leave it a little longer than Americans. Americans put it up as early as after Thanksgiving. So, we kind of just combined that and we put it up the day after Thanksgiving and leave it up until mid-January.
KM:	Yeah.
Barbara Lunati	We have a fake tree which helps.
KM:	Oh, okay. [both laugh] I was going to ask. Definitely no candles then.
Barbara Lunati	And, traditions — we kind of just created our own traditions for the most part. Like, we have a fire place — I've never had a place with a fire place — so, in the winter when it's cold my husband loves to make fires. We have some soup or some stew, something like that. We sit in front of the fireplace and eat. That's one of the traditions. One of the traditions from Germany that I really like is to have coffee and maybe some cake or some cookies in the afternoon, around three. We come out here in the sun room on Saturday or Sunday afternoon and we basically keep that tradition.
KM:	And then, sports?
Barbara Lunati	Uhm, sports. Well, I'm not a big team sports person.
KM:	[Laughs] Yeah, I sort of sensed that.
Barbara Lunati	But, what keeps me feeling like I'm almost in Germany are the things I've loved to do since childhood which are, biking, hiking, and swimming. We have a unit in Parkfairfax; we go to the pools there. So, I feel connected when I do those things.
KM:	What do you miss most about Germany, while here?
Barbara Lunati	So, of course I miss my family. I miss lifelong friends, some of them I

	met in pre-school. I miss the atmosphere that you have in Germany. I have to say, Alexandria is kind of similar like, the atmosphere and just the overall way of life. Uhm, I feel things here are so rushed I mean, most people, especially in Alexandria work full-time and they have their kids in all these activities. So, it's like, rushing from working full-time to rushing to the activities on the weekend. Even in the restaurants I feel rushed. I mean, when you go in the restaurants and you eat dinner, as soon as you're done you either want dessert or you get the check. I feel that you should be able to just relax and enjoy the food and the company of your friends or family. I miss that. It's too rushed here. When we adopted Mia, I made a conscious decision to work part-time and I was lucky enough that my employer — at that time — allowed that. So, I still do that and I work from home. We're making a conscious effort not to be rushed and to make family the first priority. I feel that's more the case in German families than here.
KM:	Now, what do you like best about Alexandria? I think you've said it, but—.
Barbara Lunati	I just love Alexandria, I love Old Town. I love the bike trails. I love the shops. I love the restaurants. The people are actually very nice. We've had nice neighbors everywhere we've moved. It's my second home, I love it.
KM:	Do you have anything else you want to add?
Barbara Lunati	No, I don't think so. I think I've said everything I've wanted to say.
KM:	[Break]
MIA'S INTRODUCTION 28:54	
KM:	This is Krystyn Moon and I'm now talking with Mia Lunati and with her mom, Barbara. We have a couple questions to ask her about her life here in Alexandria. So, first Mia can we talk a little bit about being adopted? When did you first realize that you were adopted from China?
THOUGHTS ON BEING ADOPTED 29:14	
Barbara Lunati	Well, I always knew because my mom got me this scrapbook and my dad like, put a bunch of stuff in it about China and about adopting me. So I knew it from very early in my life.
KM:	Were there photographs in the book?
Mia Lunati	Photographs and little things that they got from China, that sort of stuff.

KM:	Cool. Being adopted, was that ever an issue at school with your friends? Did people ask you questions or anything like that?
Mia Lunati	They would ask me questions sometimes but, they were never really mean about it or got into my business. So, It was not really an issue.
KM:	So I have a funny story. I was working on your questions with Abby [Krystyn's daughter] and she was reading them and said, "I didn't know Mia was adopted!" [all laugh] She had no idea because your family looks like our family. So, I was just curious. Are you ever curious about your birth mother and your family in China?
Mia Lunati	Well, yeah. I do wonder sometimes but, I have a nice mom and dad so, it's not a very often, upcoming thought. So, yeah.
THOUGHTS ON VISITING CHINA 30:40	
KM:	Do you ever want to visit China? You were adopted from Hunan, right?
Mia Lunati	Yeah, I definitely want to visit China and learn more about the culture and stuff.
Barbara Lunati	We're probably going to go soon, right?
Mia Lunati	Yeah. Like, next summer I'm probably going with my Chinese class.
KM:	Really?
Mia Lunati	Yeah.
LEARNING DIFFERENT LANGUAGES 31:04	
KM:	Oh. So, the next question was about learning Chinese and school.
Mia Lunati	Yeah.
KM:	Right? So when did you first start learning Chinese?
Mia Lunati	Well.
KM:	Mandarin, right?
Mia Lunati	Yeah. I started in elementary school, in like 3 rd grade or something like that and now I'm taking Chinese in GW [George Washington Middle School]
KM:	Great, and how's your German?
Mia Lunati	My mom always makes sure that I'm practicing my German and I watch German TV during the week so, I am quite fluent.
KM:	I know, I hear you all the time. What else do you do with your mom

	that's tied to her heritage? Do you want to talk maybe about food or —?
COOKING WITH MOM 31:51	
Mia Lunati	Sometimes I help her make some German food and that's basically it, [looks to her mother] right?
KM:	Like, what type of food?
Mia Lunati	Well, we like making Schnitzel.
KM:	[Krystyn and Mia laugh] There we go. Is that your favorite?
Mia Lunati	Yeah.
VISITING GERMANY 32:14	
KM:	What else do you do with your mom that's related to being German?
Mia Lunati	Well, we visit Germany.
KM:	Oh, okay.
Mia Lunati	We go to stores there and do all sorts of hiking and stuff.
KM:	Do you bike in Germany?
Mia Lunati	No.
KM:	Or, just in the neighborhood?
Mia Lunati	No, I don't think I've ever biked in Germany.
Barbara Lunati	Yeah, just because we don't have enough bikes.
KM:	Okay, yeah.
Barbara Lunati	We don't take our bikes with us or otherwise, you betcha.
KM:	Do you have anything else you want to talk about?
Mia Lunati	No, that's fine. [End] 32:50