

# Selma Moidel Smith

Oral History, Session IV — October 31, 2013

Interview by Attorney Rosalyn Zakheim

Women Trailblazers in the Law Oral History Project of the American Bar Association

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Zakheim: Hello, it's October 31, 2013. I'm Rosalyn Zakheim, and I'm at the home of Selma Moidel Smith to continue our interview of Selma Moidel Smith for the ABA Women Trailblazers Project. Selma, last time we were talking about your involvement in various bar associations, and could you tell us now about the Council of Bar Associations of Southern California and your involvement with that?

Smith: All right, yes. We actually had an interesting, short-lived, Council of Bar Associations of Southern California.<sup>1</sup> Max Gilford was president, and I was elected to be the charter secretary, for the representation of the Women Lawyers' Association. This was in 1949. We were scheduled to meet on a particular day, and I started out from my office on Spring Street to go to Sixth and Hope, where the University Club was situated, briefcase in hand, and thereupon encountered a bit of history. When I arrived at the door of the club, and I was smiling at the person who opened the door, the gentleman on the other side informed me I could not come in.

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<sup>1</sup> "Portias Join Bar Council," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (June 23, 1949); "Lawyer Group Picks Officers," *Los Angeles Times* (July 22, 1949): 2; "So. Cal. Women Lawyers Meet," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (July 25, 1949); "Bar Assns. Council To Meet Tonight," *LADJ* (Aug. 25, 1949); "S.F. Lawyers Club Hosts to Joint Council Meeting," *LADJ* (Aug. 25, 1949); "New State Bar President To Speak Here 27th [to Council]," *LADJ* (Oct. 21, 1949); "Portias Choose Council Delegates," *LADJ* (May 8, 1951).

Zakheim: And why was that?

Smith: Women were not allowed at the University Club, unless perhaps in a rear elevator in which they were going to a social event of any occasion. I said, “No, I’m not here for anything social. No, we’re having a meeting of the Council of Bar Associations.” He said, “Yes, they’re all here, but you are not permitted to come in.” I held up my briefcase, and I said, “I have here what we need for the meeting, and they will be wondering why I haven’t appeared.” And he said, “Well, I’m sorry, madam, but you will not be entering the University Club.”

Zakheim: And what did you do?

Smith: Well, I did the literary turn on my heel, and left, and came straight back to my office, and I sent a telegraph message — I wrote out for Western Union — and sent to Max Gilford, to inform him, and it was addressed to him at the club. He did indeed receive it, and that day the meeting did not exactly take place [chuckling]. I will say that, historically, we did not ever return to it again. So I can say that I’ve had the pleasure of [laughing] being turned away, and I believe that that is the very kind of thing I think we have improved on at this late date.

Zakheim: Where did the meetings proceed in the future, after the University Club incident?

Smith: We held them at the private rooms of a restaurant or somewhere that would be a public place where we could not possibly engage in this kind of conversation again.

Zakheim: Did the men who were part of the Council of Bar Associations say anything to you about this incident?

Smith: No, Max himself apologized, saying it never crossed his mind, saying, “Please forgive the oversight,” and that it was a shameful thing, et cetera, and said, “It will never happen again.” So that was the event that I think stood out for me in mention of the Council. For three years, I did continue to represent the Women Lawyers’ Association. By that time, the Los Angeles Bar, later the Los Angeles County Bar Association, had already, shall we say, “enclosed” the bar associations and so, as I now look back, it was rather short lived — well intentioned, but short lived.

Zakheim: Did the L.A. County Bar Association permit women members from the beginning?

Smith: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Zakheim: Well, I know one of the other organizations that you’ve been extremely active in was the National Association of Women Lawyers, or “NAWL.” We refer to it as NAWL most of the time.

Smith: Oh, yes, we do.

Zakheim: Could you tell us about that involvement?

Smith: Yes, well, that one started early and continues to this very day, and will continue as far as I will be able to [laughing]. Well, let us say that it is a long-time association because, as it happens, the National Association had its own groups in various states that were affiliates. And at that time, the Southern California Women Lawyers Association was indeed an affiliate. So that when I became a member of the Southern California Women Lawyers the day I was admitted to practice, I automatically was becoming a member of the National Association of Women

Lawyers. It has been a long association, I'm happy to say.<sup>2</sup> They have been very kind on many occasions — in fact, have honored me.<sup>3</sup> In most recent times [2005], they established for the first time a law student writing competition and kindly gave it my name. Each year it does have its competition nationally, and a young woman law student will be recognized, and published, so that we have participation *early* from women law students who are, shortly we hope on those occasions, going to be members of the bar — additional women lawyers.

Zakheim: Have you met any of the young women who've received the Selma Moidel Smith [Law Student] Writing [Competition] award?

Smith: I was able to meet one of them. I've also had contact otherwise — I have not met them, but I did have one. And we were at the luncheon together, which was at the Waldorf, which is where NAWL has its annual event.<sup>4</sup>

As it happens, I had occasion to write the history of the National Association of Women Lawyers. This is intertwined, as we will see later, with the American Bar Association because I arrived at the American Bar as the liaison from the National Association of Women Lawyers at the request of the Senior Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association [in 1996].<sup>5</sup> By that introduction, I then became a member

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<sup>2</sup> On appointment as NAWL's Regional Director for the Pacific Region, "Woman Lawyer Receives Honor," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (Jan. 20, 1949); "Women Lawyers Honor Former Warren Woman," *Warren (Ohio) Tribune-Chronicle* (Jan. 20, 1949).

<sup>3</sup> Smith was presented the NAWL Lifetime of Achievement Award at the 1999 NAWL Annual Meeting in Atlanta.

<sup>4</sup> Caption and photo of Christine McIsaac (winner), Immediate Past President Lisa Horowitz, and SMS, "NAWL's Annual Luncheon: July 25, 2009, Waldorf=Astoria, New York," *Women Lawyers Journal* 94:2 (Fall 2009): 8.

<sup>5</sup> For articles written by SMS as liaison in NAWL's *Women Lawyers Journal*, see her C.V.

of the Division — I had already long been a member of the ABA — and continued, and continue now to work with the Senior Lawyers Division and ABA.

The National Association of Women Lawyers was founded in 1899. I wrote the centennial history, and that was published as a first offering in the Senior Lawyers Division of the ABA.<sup>6</sup> It was a cover issue, with a very lovely picture of a gathering of the National Association of Women Lawyers at a luncheon, a large picture that covered the whole cover of the entire publication. So, they were very kind to do this, and I was glad that as a liaison the first thing I did was to make a broad path for NAWL in the annals of the ABA. And that was reprinted in the journal of NAWL.

I wrote the history of the Southern California Women Lawyers as well. That was in 2001, and both the now–Women Lawyers Association and the National Association of Women Lawyers published it.

Zakheim: Where were they published?

Smith: In NAWL's *Women Lawyers Journal*,<sup>7</sup> and in the *Newsletter* of the Women Lawyers Association,<sup>8</sup> which was printed in hard copy at that time. So it is not lost in the archives.

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<sup>6</sup> Selma Moidel Smith, "A Century of Achievement: The Centennial of the National Association of Women Lawyers — The First 50 Years," *Experience* 9:1 (Fall 1998 cover story): 6–12; ". . . The Second 50 Years," *Experience* 9:2 (Winter 1999): 24–31. Reprinted in *Women Lawyers Journal* 85:2 (Summer 1999): 17–33, with biography of Smith (p. 16).

The text of this, and most of SMS's other articles (all of which are listed in her C.V.), may be found on her Web page at the Stanford Women's Legal History Biography Project: [http://wlh.law.stanford.edu/biography\\_search/biophage/?woman\\_lawyer\\_id=10901](http://wlh.law.stanford.edu/biography_search/biophage/?woman_lawyer_id=10901).

<sup>7</sup> Selma Moidel Smith, "NAWL's Southern California Council," *Women Lawyers Journal*, 87:1 (Fall 2001): 15–16.

<sup>8</sup> Selma Moidel Smith, "Women's History Month — A Look at WLALA's History" [History of Southern California Women Lawyers Association] *WLALA Newsletter* (March 2001): 1, 4.

Zakheim: That's what we like to hear.

Smith: Yes!

Zakheim: We've been discussing NAWL, and I know that you were involved in a Law Day celebration in 1960 and, I think, '61 for NAWL. Can you describe that?

Smith: Yes. Actually, they took place in Los Angeles. In 1960 and '61, I was appointed by the president of NAWL to be the California member of the Law Day Committee that had been created in response to President Eisenhower's declaration of Law Day. So we planned quite a nice event, some of which spilled over into 1961 when we had the next one. The one of 1960 was held at the Ambassador Hotel, in the Coconut Grove.<sup>9</sup> It had originally been scheduled for a different place, a smaller hotel. By reason of the interest that was generated, I'm happy to say that we actually filled the Coconut Grove. I was on television, and radio, talking about the forthcoming Law Day. By all means, this was not simply a women's event of either the National or the California or Los Angeles women lawyers. The men were there as well — judges and officials. They were very, very successful events.

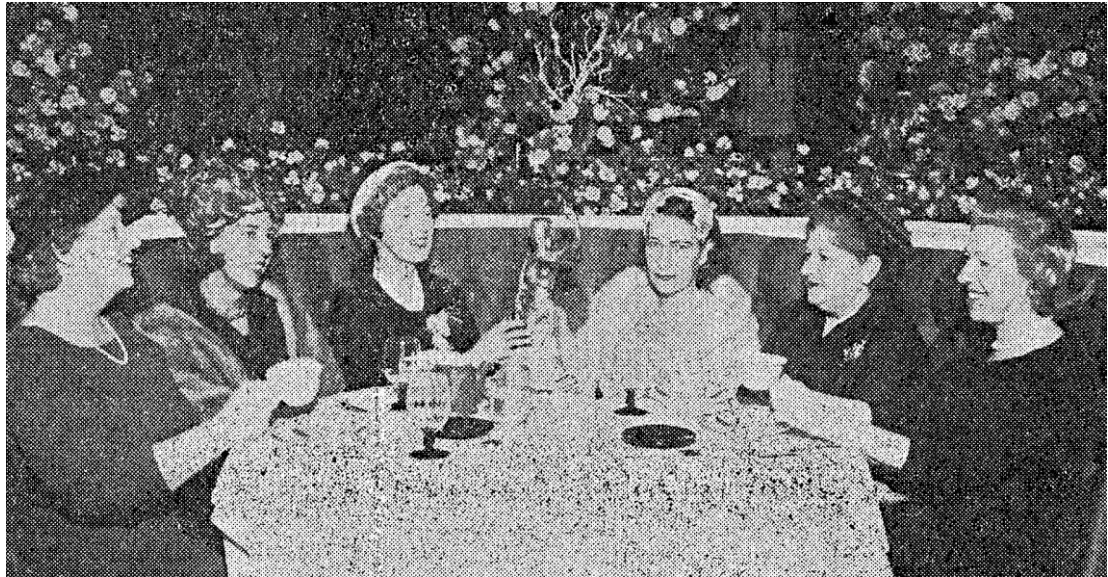
Zakheim: How did you publicize them?

Smith: We had several good ideas about that. One of them, of course, was television. I appeared on several programs, always for the purpose of publicizing the fact that we

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<sup>9</sup> "Coconut Grove to be Scene of Law Day Luncheon and Program," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (April 15, 1960); "Law Day Observance: Women Set Huge Fete for May 1," *Metropolitan News* (April 4, 1960); "L.A. Women Lawyers To Plan Peace Program," *Los Angeles Herald Express* (April 4, 1960); "Coconut Grove Event Will Climax Law Day Observance," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (April 29, 1960); "SUNDAY: Luncheon Will Mark Law Day," *Los Angeles Times* (April 29, 1960): A5.

were going to initiate a new thing under President Eisenhower's declaration of this event. Law Day was May 1, and it was not by chance that that was what was called Law Day, drawing contrast, of course —



Local heads of women lawyers organizations meet at Ambassador Hotel to plan Law Day Luncheon to be held in the Coconut Grove, April 30, 1961 — (l.-r.) Ariel Hilton, president, Kappa Beta Pi legal sorority; Katherine Hall, president, Phi Delta Delta legal sorority; Martha Stewart Yerkes, president, Women Lawyers' Club; Adele Springer, national Law Day chair, National Association of Women Lawyers; Belle Siegel, president, Southern California Women Lawyers Association; SMS, member of NAWL national Law Day Committee and treasurer, Iota Tau Tau international legal sorority.

Zakheim: Now, was there an essay contest?

Smith: Yes, I was in charge of the contests. I gave the title, "What Law Day Means to Me."<sup>10</sup>

I'm happy to say that we did have a winner.<sup>11</sup> The prize was, in fact, a volume that had just come out, Professor Barbara Armstrong at Berkeley Law School with her book, *California Family Law*. We knew that this would be of great interest to all women lawyers, and men as well, but primarily it was, as we know, the women who would be concerned with family law.

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<sup>10</sup> "Law Day Essay Prize Offered to Women Students," *Metropolitan News* (March 17, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> "Law Student, Mother Of 5, Is Law Day Prize Winner," *Metropolitan News* (April 1960).

Then, in 1961, it was expanded and now it was going to include a court motto contest and a song.<sup>12</sup> So we decided we would have judges, prominent judges. They included Raymond Burr who was, of course, very well known for the “Perry Mason” program. And for the song, we had Steve Allen and his wife, Jayne Meadows.<sup>13</sup> We were all sitting on the dais together and had the opportunity to have nice conversations. As it happens, Steve Allen and his wife lived up the street from me, and our children were often together, at my home and theirs as well. [Jayne and I were Spanish dance partners at a local dance school. I had also written an article on Steve Allen at UCLA Extension which he asked permission to use for his own P.R.]

Zakheim: I wondered what the Hollywood connection was.

Smith: Oh, yes [laughing]. At any rate, those were expanded, and I appeared on television again. It was called, “Social Security in Action,”<sup>14</sup> and there was a whole segment of it that was given to me to publicize — and I was interviewed about — Law Day.

I would skip ahead to Law Day 1965 [and the Women Lawyers’ Association (of Los Angeles)]. We did something unusual there. I had suggested the inclusion of Spanish-speaking representatives. I thought, how nice to have the women lawyers

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<sup>12</sup> “Women Lawyers Law day Song Contest Set,” *Metropolitan News* (Feb. 17, 1961); “Law Day Slogan Contest Underway,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (Feb. 6, 1961); “Law Day Essay Contest For Women Students Underway,” *LADJ* (Feb. 7, 1961); “Law Day Song, Poster Contests Announced,” *LADJ* (March 1, 1961); group photo, “Local Heads of Women Lawyers Organizations . . .,” *LADJ* (April 14, 1961); and “Court Newspapers Honored At Law Day Luncheon,” *LADJ* (May 2, 1961).

<sup>13</sup> “Women Judges, TV Stars To Be Honored At Law Day Luncheon,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (April 28, 1961).

<sup>14</sup> April 9, 1961 (weekly public service television series from 1958 to 1966). See “Be informed on TV,” *Los Angeles Mirror* (April 8, 1961) [“Mrs. Selma Moidel Smith, Los Angeles Lawyer, tells about the forthcoming 1961 National Law Day”]; and feature in “Barristers in Brief,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (April 7, 1961).



who were the Latin-American consular corps — diplomatic service — serving in Los Angeles. And so I had contacted my friend, Concha Gonzalez, wife of the editor of *La Opinión*, the newspaper that was renowned, of course. I suggested to her that it would be nice to do that. She agreed, and I said, “Would you like to invite them,” and she said, “Well, yes, you know,” she said, “but my feeling is, this is so far out of their duties — they’ve never done this kind of thing before.” She said, “I really don’t think they would come.” So I said, “Oh, all right,” and then I promptly called one of them, and after our little chat, in Spanish of course, she thought that was nice and agreed to come. I then called the second and the third. They also were coming. And so at that point I called my friend Concha back again, and I said, “I now have three.” And she laughed at the other end, and she said, “Selma,” she said, “you are a woman who does not take ‘no’ for an answer” [and she then invited the others]. [both laughing] I’ve remembered her words through the years. We were very close friends. By reason of her, we had splendid publicity in the Spanish newspaper for this event, all talking about Law Day and the meaning of Law Day. So we were publicizing this — not just to our own women lawyers, or our immediate community, but to the wider community. And involving a segment that, in the thank-you’s that I received afterwards, included one that I’ve remembered very much — one who said, “And I want to thank you for letting us know. We see how far ahead you women lawyers are in your country.” Of course, we knew the gaps, but they were taking a lesson from this. Where they had attended, and what they had seen, and this large gathering — this is something that they took back to their countries.

I must tell you about a certain dimension that was included in the program, in the way that they were made known. The president, Carla Hills — she was the first one after our unification — would be introducing me. And she was unaware that while she was making the introduction of me — and this was, again, at a full gathering — she was unaware that I had brought with me a small bag from which I was taking, and took out, a Spanish shawl. And while she was talking, I was wrapping the Spanish shawl around my shoulders. And when I stood up to make the introductions that I was scheduled to make of all of the women of the diplomatic corps, I was wearing my Spanish shawl and I made the introductions in Spanish — to their great delight, and translated of course into English. This they had never seen before and which [laughing] I'm sure hasn't been done since, in that way. So this was something that they burst into applause about. I had had placed at their special table a little flag of each of the Latin-American countries represented. And so, with my Spanish shawl and my lift at the end with my swish of the shawl over my shoulder, I concluded that portion of the program. And it was very widely acclaimed, I must say, and remembered, as I thought it would. And so it linked large communities of lawyers, women lawyers, Spanish-speaking, English-speaking — it stood out, and everyone talked about it for a long time.

The speaker at Law Day 1965 was Judge Sarah T. Hughes of Texas, whom I had secured as our guest speaker. She was, of course, as we well remember on that unfortunate day of President Kennedy's assassination, to swear into office Lyndon B. Johnson as president. She gave a marvelous talk to us on Law Day.

I do want to say at this point that in that group of Spanish-speaking attendees was Dr. Carlos de la Torre, who was president of the Cuban Bar Association in Exile, living in Los Angeles at that time. When I introduced him, I had checked ahead for the highest ranking kind of introduction, because I knew him personally. We were good friends. I finally encountered the phrase that I wanted to use in introducing



To Selma Moidel Smith  
with best wishes  
Mrs. Casey Sarah T. Hughes

him, which was “el señor doctor don Carlos de la Torre.” All of the Spanish-speaking people recognized this was the highest rank of introduction that one could give. And he was the author, in Spanish, of a book on “El Imperio de la Ley” — “The Rule of Law.”<sup>15</sup> This was something that was very memorable to people on that occasion as well. He attended not only that one but came the next year as well.

Moving into the one of 1966, the Law Day on that occasion was in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel, in Beverly Hills, of course. We filled the International Ballroom, and again, we had our Spanish-speaking guests. I do want to say that on that occasion, I had checked with Justice Mildred Lillie, and I asked her to introduce our guest speaker. I had invited Lorna Lockwood.<sup>16</sup> I was

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<sup>15</sup> Carlos de la Torre y de la Rosa, *El Imperio de la Arbitrariedad Como Norma Fundamental de Gobierno* (Mexico City, 1964), arising from the International Commission of Jurists’ *El Imperio de la Ley en Cuba* (Geneva, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> “Justice Lockwood To Address Women Lawyers,” *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (April 22, 1966); “Many Programs Underway for Law Day,” *LADJ* (April 27, 1966); “Edna Plummer To

chair of this meeting, not just the Spanish-speaking part but the whole program. The guest speaker, Lorna Lockwood, was from Arizona.



**LET LAW REIGN!** — Participants in the Women Lawyers' Association Law Day observance Sunday in the Beverly-Hilton are pictured. From left are Selma Moidel Smith, program chairman; Kate Whyner, winner of a lawyers' Law Day motto contest; Edna Covert Plummer, winner of the Ernestine Stahlhut award (next to the award

Metropolitan News Photo by Floyd Kornberg  
plaque on which winners' names are inscribed); Arizona Supreme Court Justice Lorna E. Lockwood, who spoke; Romaine Harper, association president; retired Los Angeles Municipal Judge May Lahey, who presented the Stahlhut award, and Nasim Naick, winner of a Law Day essay contest among college students.

She was the very first woman to be a chief justice of a state supreme court.

Mildred Lillie made a very nice introduction of her. I also had California Supreme Court Associate Justice Marshall McComb in attendance. Again, we had essay and court motto contests.<sup>17</sup> I wanted to make gifts to those winners, and one gift was the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a twenty-four-volume set, for the essay winner. And the

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Get Honor At WLA Luncheon," *LADJ* (April 29, 1966); "Law Day to Be Marked," *Los Angeles Times* (May 1, 1966): D16; Sam Gordon, "Ely, Lynch, Lockwood View Rule of Law," *Metropolitan News* (May 3, 1966); "Justice Is Speaker At Law Day Event," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* (May 3, 1966): C1; group photos, *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (May 3, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> "Law Day Essay Contest Told, Program Slated," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (March 9, 1966); "Motto Contest Under Way," *Metropolitan News* (March 16, 1966); "Two Contests Announced by Women Lawyers Assn.: For Youth, Lawyers," *Los Angeles Daily Journal* (March 18, 1966); "Attorneys, Students Eligible for Lawyers' Assn. Contests," *Los Angeles Times* (April 3, 1966); "Two Contests Set Up By Women Lawyers," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* (April 20, 1966).

other winner, for the motto, was a six-volume-set of Roscoe Pound on Jurisprudence. I want to indicate that there was recognition given to this kind of contribution to Law Day as well.

Then I moved from the podium, where I was introducing all of these events, and I simply walked a few steps over to the piano that was on stage. I sat down without a word to anyone, and I began to play the piano, which was of course something unknown *completely* to all of my associates, my friends, my fellow members of the associations, and certainly all members of the bar. I performed several, four or five, of my compositions. I will say that on this occasion, I certainly added a couple of tangos so that my Spanish-speaking friends could all enjoy them. Afterwards, I made my little bow, to which everyone applauded very loudly, I will say, and then just as quietly, returned to the podium and continued as chair of the Law Day event. This, of course, was the first time that they had any inkling of the fact that I did play the piano, that I was a composer, and in fact I have to remember that [state Deputy Attorney General] Ariel Hilton stepped up immediately afterwards and said, “Are these all copyrighted?” [both laughing] And I said, “You may be sure they are, each and every one.”

Zakheim: Oh, that’s funny.

Smith: As it happens, they total about a hundred piano compositions, many of which have been orchestrated and performed both ways. I will say that that did provide a surprise occasion that was quite talked about, shall we say, and I guess added another facet to my lifelong interests. So that is also part of “my story.”

Zakheim: Was there anything you wanted to add about the various Law Days?

Smith: Yes, I would like to say that in 1968, we had as the guest speaker Yvonne Brathwaite — later, of course, her name became Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, and now, she’s recently retired as L.A. County supervisor — who was then the first black woman elected to the California Assembly. She spoke on the need for understanding between the white population and the black population. She made an excellent appearance before us.

Zakheim: I know she also, I think, became a congresswoman, didn’t she, in later years?

Smith: Yes, in later years.

Zakheim: And what was the impact of her speech about black–white relationships?

Smith: I think it had a very salutary effect.

Zakheim: Do you want to tell me about the articles in “Vida Social” in *La Opinión* — and the picture you have in front of you, of the first Law Day meeting with the consular people from various Latin-American countries?

Smith: Yes, we are looking at a photo that was taken in the office of the Mexican consul-general. I’m looking at these faces: the very lovely women who graced our occasion.



Women Lawyers’ Association of Los Angeles, Law Day Luncheon, Biltmore Hotel, April 27, 1968 — (l.-r.) SMS, Superior Court Judge Kathleen Parker, and State Assemblywoman Yvonne Brathwaite.

There are nine of us who are there. The very same photo was reproduced in the Spanish newspaper, *La Opinión*.<sup>18</sup> The entire story of the occasion was written up in detail, which was very kind of Concha to publish. Then, also, when we had the occasion of Yvonne Brathwaite, I'm looking also at that — we are looking at



Women of the Latin American diplomatic corps in Los Angeles in the office of the Mexican consul general to prepare for Law Day 1965 — (l.-r.) Olivia de Anguizola (Panama), Trinidad Simó Alemán (El Salvador), Margarita de Hedger (Paraguay), SMS, Adela de Guzmán (Honduras), Laura Morphy (Mexico), María Armendáriz (League of the Americas), Blanca Díaz Pou (Dominican Republic); Clementina de Arcia (Nicaragua).

the “Vida Social”<sup>19</sup> — of the three of us in a photo: that was Yvonne Brathwaite and Judge Kathleen Parker, who was the one who received an honor, and myself. At any rate, the story is replete with telling how, in the 1968 occasion, I had again all of the ladies, now not just from the consular corps but, as well, all of the women presidents of all of the many Spanish-speaking social organizations in the city of Los Angeles, which I had again the pleasure of introducing. All of them are named in this cover-all story that was written in *La Opinión*. They gave us wonderful cooperation to spread the word of Law Day to everyone of Spanish speech as well.<sup>20</sup> So I think our goal was met. Certainly, we informed the English-speaking community of this new and continuing occasion, and I think much to the profit of all of us.

<sup>18</sup> “Vida Social,” feature and photo, *La Opinión* (May 2, 1965).

<sup>19</sup> “Vida Social,” with photo of Parker, Brathwaite, and SMS, *La Opinión* (May 12, 1968).

<sup>20</sup> “Gran Banquete de la asociación de abogadas el “Dia de la ley,” on Law Day banquet with feature and photo of SMS, *La Opinión* (May 7, 1967).

The *La Opinión* was used — she used it with me if I took a trip. She put in my photo. She told where I was, and “su hijo Marcos,” because I would take him. She was a dear friend of mine. She wrote to me, “I write you things that I could never tell my sisters.” I mean, we were that — . You could have picked up *La Opinión* frequently, and there would be something about me.<sup>21</sup> She looked forward to the fact I attended the Agrupación de las Angelinas. I was part of all their social life.<sup>22</sup>

Zakheim: You did amazing things. You were probably the first person to bring the Mexican consular corps anywhere in the legal —

Smith: Oh, it was more than Mexican. It was all of Latin America. I should have read off the countries that were represented.

Zakheim: Before we proceed, I wanted to ask, Selma, I know you speak fluent Spanish.

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: You are not somebody who they would go, “Oh, she’s trying to speak Spanish.”

Smith: No.

Zakheim: How did you come about that skill?

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<sup>21</sup> “La Señora Selma Moidel Smith,” photo and feature, *La Opinión* (May 8, 1977). Also, articles on travels and personal events (July 26, 1970; Aug. 12, 1973; June 8, 1975; Oct. 21, 1979; and Aug. 3, 1980 [president, National Board, Medical College of Pennsylvania]).

<sup>22</sup> On the League of the Americas, see “Vida Social,” *La Opinión* (Aug. 29, 1965; May 11, 1969; Oct. 5, 1969; Jan. 25, 1970; May 31, 1970; Oct. 4, 1970; Jan. 23, 1972); also, “League of Americas To Install,” *Van Nuys News* (April 13, 1969): E-27A; and “League’s 50th Year Noted,” *Los Angeles Times* (Sept. 25, 1969): G2. On SMS and other social groups and events, see Oct. 6, 1968; Dec. 22, 1968; June 14, 1970; Jan. 24, 1971; Dec. 2, 1979; and April 5, 1981.



Smith: I was in seventh grade. We had to take a language, you know. Usually it was Spanish or something. So we did. But here's what happens with memory at this moment. Before the seventh grade — this was back in Ohio — I had borrowed my sister's high heels, and there was a Spanish shawl, the kind of thing they used to give as gifts at that time, and so I gathered it around me, and I was doing steps — that I had never seen. I had had no Spanish antecedents that I know of. And there I was doing what turned out to be — the heel things, you know?

Zakheim: Yes!

Smith: Don't ask. I never saw it anywhere. We wouldn't have, there in northeastern Ohio [both laughing]. What would we be doing with Spanish, you know? There weren't any that I ever heard of or knew. Where this came from I don't know. So when I was pulling that shawl on my shoulders at the Law Day, I was really drawing a connection, unknowingly all the way back to there. Little did I know when I was there that I was going later to be doing this [laughing] for real. And of course, in between, I was learning Spanish dance. When I did dance school and so on, I was doing Spanish dance as well. In the seventh grade — to come closer to the answer to your question, and you see what a detour it took, we were having a visit. It was near Cinco de Mayo. They were going to tell us about it, you know, but in the meantime, we were doing our Spanish in class, and the teacher was from the South. Let us say, I don't know whether you've ever heard Spanish with a southern accent [both laughing]. Somehow, however, when I spoke, I realized — and they realized — that I spoke with a Spanish accent, I mean, as a native Spanish speaker. I'd never heard a word of Spanish, and somehow the sounds that I made, and maybe you noticed it —.

You see, if I were to simply read to you, for example, the names of these people [in the 1965 Law Day photo]: Olivia de Anguizola, del país de Panamá; Trinidad Simó Alemán, de El Salvador; Margarita de Hedger, Paraguay; Adela de Guzmán, de Honduras; Laura Morphy, de México, María Armendáriz, Blanca Días Pou, de la República Dominicana; Clementina de Arcia, Nicaragua.

This is how I always spoke. Don't ask me where it came from, or anything else, except that on the occasion in the seventh grade, the teacher, of course, and the students, had already recognized who was speaking Spanish. So the event took place right on Olvera Street, because that's where they first came in and settled themselves — there's a nice clearing there. And because this was the occasion, the Mexican consul general was there, and so our teacher announced that her class had studied and that “we have a student who has a little message.” I got up and simply spoke. I wasn't reading, I simply spoke. I had read what I was supposed to, to myself, but I didn't even have it with me. I've never read from notes. That's why I was always at ease in court and speaking. Whether it was the summary, or whether it was the opening statement, that was never a problem. All of those things came easily to me. And heavens, certainly on cross-examination, I [laughing] — it came easily.

Zakheim: Oh, I bet you cut them apart. That would be fun. I wish we had tapes of that.

Smith: If I got a smell of a liar on the stand, oooooohh! [both laughing]. Then everyone knew it before I was through. Anyway, so I made my little talk in Spanish, of welcome to him, you know, and how happy we were to be on Olvera Street — to such effect that he said to the teacher, “If she ever comes to Mexico, I want her to come and visit us there.” That's how pleased he was. That was my first public speaking of Spanish.

It's just always there. And anytime, anywhere, that I encounter someone who has, by their names or appearance — I will say something to them such as, “¿De dónde proviene usted?” And they tell me, “O, ¿habla español?” [both laughing] “Sí, ¿cómo no?” Y entonces, cualquier tiempo, y inmediatamente, me dicen, “¿Y de cuál país es usted?”

Zakheim: “What country are you from?”

Smith: Y, entonces yo digo, “¿Qué opina?” Y he recibido, de numerosos países, “¿de Sudamérica, de Centroamérica, de España?” — ¡También!

Zakheim: No, “los Estados Unidos” [laughing].

Smith: Nunca, pero nunca [both laughing]. I have no explanation for it.

Zakheim: Did you continue taking Spanish in school?

Smith: I did. Well, I had to fill in, at Hollywood High, so I took advanced Spanish. In fact, my teacher, Mr. Johnson, wanted to sponsor me as a linguist.

Zakheim: How wonderful!

Smith: He wanted me to have my career in language. And of course, in my sixth grade, they wanted me to have my career as a writer — poetry and prose, and so on. And in Warren, of course, in Ohio, I was all set following in the footsteps as a lawyer, and as a speaker. So here I am —

Zakheim: You could have been a composer.

Smith: Yes — well, I am.

Zakheim: Well, you are. I mean as a career.

Smith: Yes, in fact, you may have seen sometime the listing in the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*.<sup>23</sup>

Zakheim: Oh, how wonderful! Oh, Selma!

Smith: And so I'm just showing it to you. This was a note that I had received [from the editor].

Zakheim: Oh my goodness! [reading:] “Classical and Serious Music: International Encyclopedia of Women Composers.”

Smith: Yes, in other words, this was not just pop stuff. And that was the card, his card that he put in. And they shipped out the book to me. This was what I furnished them. They wanted a photo, so they have the photo there. Somewhere here is the actual listing.

Zakheim: There you are!

Smith: Yes. They listed about thirty-some of my compositions. How they chose these particular ones, I'm not sure. And this was published in London and New York.

Zakheim: And that was in the 1980s.

Smith: Yes. You're a percipient witness.

Zakheim: Right [both laughing].

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<sup>23</sup> *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* (2nd edition, 2 vols., 1987).

Smith: Yes. This is how I would prefer to be talking. Whether I say many things out loud, I've connected, while I was talking, to things that — aha, I never saw the connection between the two Spanish shawls before.

Zakheim: Well, when you talked about that, I just lit up, and I was so glad the tape was on [laughing], because I thought “That is perfect.”

Smith: Yes.

Zakheim: Because you were just talking.

Smith: That's what's happening. Two processes are going on. Here, I'm trying to talk within certain bounds. So much is going on, *inside*, at the same time. I'm speaking one thing — I'm there at the Biltmore Bowl, I'm there at the Ambassador, I'm there at the International Ballroom. I'm sitting there. I mean, I'm at the podium! I can look out and see everybody. I'm at the piano. I mean, it's going on — my memory works that way. I'm right there.

Zakheim: That's what you tell me.

Smith: And then, when you're dipping back into things, you see things in them that you had never seen — in addition to all the things you are seeing while you're *there*. You now have an overlay, and that's made up of, “Now, how do you see it — all these years later?” And then, boom, while I'm talking to you — there you have it! I tell you this because, for someone like myself, all of the things now all hop to each other. It's like glue or, I should say, a magnet. Something is a magnet. Everything having to do with it comes to the fore. There it is, and I'm suddenly sitting *here*, experiencing it. And I

didn't even know *that* until I'm talking to you now. And I have to overcome those feelings in order to just — verbalize. And feelings are — I mean — why do I have music? Because there are things you don't say with words.

Zakheim: Which is something to *say*.

And now, to conclude this session of Selma's oral history interviews, we'll hear one of the pieces she performed at the 1966 Law Day Luncheon of the Women Lawyers' Association of Los Angeles in the International Ballroom of the Beverly Hilton Hotel. It's a tango, one of many tangos Selma has composed. The title is "Tango in C minor, No. 2, Opus 71." [Click below to play music.](#)