

5-13-1988

Interview with Mania Ivanov Ritter (FA 84)

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Folklife Archives, Manuscripts &, "Interview with Mania Ivanov Ritter (FA 84)" (1988). *FA Oral Histories*. Paper 407.
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Tape: 9 of 9
Interviewee: Mania Ritter
Interviewer: Kim Schmidt
Location: Bowling Green, KY
Date: May 13, 1988
Transcribed By: Larry Morrissey
Transcribing Machine: Panasonic RR-830 Transcriber

SIDE A

Counter #

[Counter begins when interviewer begins speaking]

000 KS: Today is Friday, May 13th, Friday the 13th, [laughs]. This is Kim Schmidt and I'm interviewing Mania Ritter. And this is the last in our series of interviews. Today we're going to sort of tie things up and bring us up to the present. Will you say something for me so I can see if the mike is working?

MR: Well, if it's working for you, it's working for me.

KS: O.K. Well, you're further away.

MR: Yeah, well I'll move closer.

[tape is paused, restarted]

KS: First of all, I want you to describe John for me. When you first met him and then after you first got married. You say oh no.

MR: Well I don't know. No, I don't know what it has to do with, with folklore. Does it, is it O.K.? I mean-

KS: Yeah, it's O.K.

MR: But I mean what does it have to do with folklore-

KS: It doesn't-

MR: -it looks like a psychology test now. (KS: [laughs] No-) Or counselor, marriage counselor test.

KS: No, this is your life story and he's your husband, so-

MR: Oh, O.K.

KS: This is just to know a little bit about him.

MR: O.K. O.K., well when I met him, let me think about the, first about the, the physical qualities. He was not a handsome man. He was very, he was young, not a handsome boy. He was tall and skinny and he had bad teeth, protruding teeth. And he was, he didn't, he was wearing the wrong kind of glasses, I don't know. But what attracted me to him is his kindness and stability. And we, we went out together, he was very generous, he's still very generous. And we, we had fun eating and drinking and walking in the streets of Paris. And to me it was a, a pleasant, pleasant experience to, to know such a, such a nice guy.

That was the beginning, what he looks now. He has, he has, he became very handsome with age. He, the kindness he had he still has, but either I was wrong with his sense of

security or we didn't, our marriage did not work well enough, so he doesn't make me secure at all. He makes me very insecure, very nervous. And that has nothing to do with this program.

KS: No.

MR: O.K.

KS: O.K. What has it been like being married to an Army officer, being a military wife?

MR: Well I, something told me to stay as far away from the military as possible. We very seldom lived on post, we always tried to live out and stay connected with civilian life. I saw that all these military people were very involved in their military affairs and forgot about the rest of the world. And I had learned, remember from that story with the handicapped man, that people close themselves in a circle and forget about the rest. And I always try to avoid that. This is something I have against sororities, you know. That just don't close yourself in one circle. So this is what I did and I liked the military just for the trips or travel. We traveled over, a lot in the United States. I've seen more of the United States than most of the people, most of the Americans. And, and that was the reason why John was in the Army, because he liked the travel. He didn't mind all the rest, all the discipline and all the, on the opposite. I mean, he's not a man of independence anyway, so that was good for him. Or maybe he was a man of independence and lost it in the Army, I don't know about that. But so it suited us fine for the time we were there. Plus it was a steady income and was O.K. And I knew the limitation, I could, I never bought the whole thing anyway.

KS: I forgot to ask him what his rank-

MR: Well he ended as a sergeant major (KS: O.K.), which is the highest of the enlisted men. Which is considered the really, the pivot of all the Army because those are the people who really know what's going on within the Army. Yeah, he, he was good as a soldier.

KS: O.K. He, he told me all the places you lived and when you all lived there and everything. I'm assuming that he probably knows (MR: Yeah.) where he lived. Of the places that you live, which was your favorite, or which place did you-

MR: Maine.

KS: Maine?

MR: Maine.

KS: How come?

050 MR: I don't know, I just, well it happened at the right time in my own life. Plus I found a job, I started teaching and I, I really enjoyed it. We spend there five years and I enjoyed. The kids were at a good age, I enjoyed them, you know, they were not babies anymore, they were kids. And I sort of, I blossomed there and took a reality of my own, of my own existence. Yeah, I was the happiest there. And plus it's a beautiful country and-

KS: I would love to see it, I've heard it's-

MR: Yeah, it is beautiful, it is. And the people were nice. The people, we met good friends. And they were also, people on the east coast are really more closer to Europeans than people in this part of the country, so I didn't have. You know, like you like to talk to me about ----- people because I'm different. I didn't have that over there. There are a lot of other, other foreigners and I'm just one of them.

KS: Is it, is it Kentucky or is it the whole area west of the east coast that's just not really-

MR: I don't know, I don't know, I never lived anywhere else. But I began to like Kentucky when I understood that there's no place for me to go [KS laughs] [laughs]. That, you know, I was too old to find new jobs, that the house is paid for, you know, it's just practical to stay here, so I began to sort of like it.

KS: You're stuck, might as well like it [laughs].

MR: That's right, that's right, that's right. But you know, I don't know because many times when we travel, I always say, I always tell John, "Oh, I'm so happy that we, they don't, they did not send us here." For instance, when we went to, to the ---- [sounds like "kiwis"] in the, in Illinois, so flat, flat. I told John, "I'm glad I didn't start here." And he said, "Well, maybe you would have liked it." I don't know, you know, you don't know.

KS: Tell me a little bit about Chris and Katya.

MR: Oh, I can tell you forever about Chris and Katya, what do you want to know exactly?

KS: I don't know, tell me a little bit about when they were children, maybe some of their personality traits, and then (MR: Yeah-) what they're doing now.

MR: Well, you know, you know, you know that, that Chris and Katya are the best thing in my life. And well, let's start with Chris. Chris is different. I always say that it took the Russian Revolution and the Second War to, to put, you know, to put John and myself together. And therefore Chris is, he is not the typical American kid. He's really part Russian, although he, he acts in a, you know, he functions in an American surrounding. He, well O.K., he's nice looking, as you know. He's, you know, but he doesn't know it, he's like dumb, he has no idea he's nice looking. And he's, he's smart, he has a good sense of humor. He's, he can be very, very charming, but he can be very difficult to live with. I always have to watch my P's and Q's when I'm talking to Chris. It's, he's like his father in that respect.

And I don't know, I wish Chris, Chris is not too happy nowadays because of his girlfriend and he has trouble recovering. He doesn't know how to, how to do things for himself, you know, to get out of the situation. He's now a doctor at Kent State and he's, he's what I call a new yuppie, yuppie Phd. I, for a long time, I thought Chris was my best friend. And now it turns out that Katya is my best friend. When they were growing up, you know, it's like the Smothers Brothers, they always says, "Mother likes Chris, liked Chris better," yeah. And while, you know, they always say, "A son is a son until he marries and a daughter is a daughter for your life," and it's true. And now I see it's true. So Katya, Katya is, I would say she's a typical American, maybe she's not, with a little bit of European flavor. She's happily married now and she, she, neither of the kids gave me any trouble whatsoever. Maybe a little bit defiance on Katya's part, I think. But I can think of once or twice, not really. The trouble I had with Katya, she went through the same teenager's thing. You know, she wouldn't get up on time and she wouldn't and her room would be a mess, but that was really all. And we had a lot of nice times together, especially when John was gone, was gone for a year, you know. We, we did a lot of nice things together and enjoyed doing things together. And even now, you know, they always think, "Well why don't we, when are we going to do this and that together?" Katya, Katya, I thought was unpractical, but she, she's sort of, she is practical. And now she's, her job is to, to raise money for a high school. And I didn't know, I didn't think Katya had all this math in her head, but she does. She's been doing that for several years and that's her title.

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And one thing that I remember, that I'll always remember Katya for is that one day, she was, we were in Maine and she was a little girl. She must have been about six, seven years old. And she had money. And she was sick and she told me one day, "Let's go to that-" You know, she was sick, but she got better. "Let's go to that town," ---- town, Old Town

it was called. And so I wrapped her and she had the little kerchief on her head because she had had a cold and everything. And she was sitting in that car and counting all her money. And I have no idea what she was doing. And then she wanted to go to a, to a jewelry store. And O.K., and I really thought she was buying something for herself. And I don't know why, she bought me a nice little, what do you call it, they're brilliant, you know. Not a brilliant, but, what do people have on their rings? A, a diamond. It was not a real diamond, but-

KS: --- ----

MR: I don't know, I don't know what-

KS: How sweet-

MR: Oh, she, she could be sweet [telephone rings]. Turn it off.

[tape is paused, restarted.]

MR: So about Katya, yeah. Well anyway, Katya, Katya is now really my best friend. And every Saturday we have big talks on the telephone and this and that. And she, she, I'm happy to see that she's happy. I regret the fact that I don't have any grandchildren, but as they live far away from me, I know that, so I can't change that. And it's better to, not to have grandchildren then, I don't know, than to have children and be divorced already or something of that sort.

KS: You sound like Mom, she wants grandchildren.

MR: Yeah, your mother is young.

KS: We keep telling her, "Wait!"

MR: Your mother is young, though. She shouldn't be wanting them yet.

KS: O.K. Did you want to tell me anything else about your children? I know you could probably talk on-

MR: I could go on, I could go on, but I, yesterday for some reason I was thinking, well no, maybe even this morning, I thought I wish Katya were here. We could drive around and we get along fine, really.

KS: You'll have to go visit her.

MR: Yeah, yes. But it's not the same, it's not the same. Well, it is, you know, when I'm at their home and all that. I like her husband a lot. Bob is a very nice man and so there's no problem, yeah.

KS: That's good.

MR: Mm-hmm.

KS: What made you decide to go into the teaching profession?

MR: It was an accident. I don't know if I told you.

KS: I don't think so.

MR: I, I was with my aunt who was taking courses at Yale. And I was having lunch with her and with another, two other professors. And they were talking, and that was in 1960,

around that, around 1960. They were talking about, after Sputnik, talking about the fact that there was, there were no Russian native speakers teaching. And that there was not enough (KS: Goodness.) people speaking Russian in America. And they were going to have that pilot course where they would take some Russian native and teach them how to teach. And oh, I could feel it all over my body, that's for me. You know, sometimes I, a few times it happened to me, that I knew that's for me, I should be there. So having the children, John was in Vietnam at the time. I had to arrange myself. My aunt was not helping me much with my, taking care of the kids, they never did. That's something I always resented because I took care of her kids, she never did take care of mine. But anyway.

150 So I, I managed and I went to Yale. And at Yale there was a very well known French expert, Dr. Nelson Brooks. Even Dr. Baldwin knows him, he was one of the biggest of the time, who had a good friend at the University of Maine. And, and then Brooks found out I was going to go to Maine. And he told, he called the other guy and said-. And so Brooks advised me to go to Maine, and I thought he was just talking like that. I really did not see the connection. But that other guy at the University of Maine, Dr. Star, was to start a N.D.E.A., it was a, was, I forget, National Defense Education Act. And it was a program to teach the teacher, the foreign language teachers how to teach a language. The right way, you know, the old way was old fashioned, you know, just translation. And that was, that was not good, so anyway. So I went through the course, Dr. Brooks liked me, I liked him, too. And then when we went to Maine, I quite accidentally decided to go and talk to Dr. Star, although he lived a hundred twenty miles away. And I went to the University of Maine. And he was waiting for me, he offered me a job right, I just went like that, you know. And he, he said, "I would like for you to teach this summer at the Institute. But in order to teach at the institute, you should, you must have one semester of experience." I had no experience.

So I, I went home, drove back home to, to Augusta, a hundred twenty miles. And I came home and I cried. I said, "I have never, never, never been offered a job." I always had to look for it and to, to anguish about it. And here I walk in and so again, I had to find, John was working and I had to find out a way of taking care, of somebody to take care of the kids. And we found a very nice lady. And I was there, I was going to the university the week and the weekend I was coming home. And it worked the whole semester and it worked very nicely.

And that my, you know, my first story about t-, I didn't know anything about teaching. I didn't know anything about teaching in America, I had never been in a high school, in a college, I didn't know. I walked in that Monday morning knowing what I was supposed to do. I closed the door, I start talking to the students, I knew I'm going to love to teaching. I felt when I started. And I did love it there.

KS: And you started teaching Russian.

MR: No, I (KS: No?) was teaching French (KS: O.K.) that semester just to give me. Then the idea, during the summer I took, I taught French Civilization or something. And I taught also Russian. But the Russian was not teaching Russian really. It was the shock, the shock language they called it. It's a language they did not know, none of the teachers knew Russian. And it was just to teach them, to remind them how it is to learn a language. So I had to, to do simple things. And I didn't have to make, there was no results to it, you know, they just-. And they, they loved it anyway.

KS: Was this for students or for professors?

MR: For teachers, for teachers.

KS: O.K., O.K.

MR: Teacher in high school. And there were teachers from all over New England. And I, I made friends there and I really, it was a great summer. And I, I did that three summers in a row.

KS: And what preparation did you have for teaching?

MR: None.

KS: None. None at all?

MR: None. None whatsoever, none whatsoever. I did have, no I did not even have a masters degree in French, I got it after. And I did have those Russian courses that I took, that was my only. And I took all, you know, all the courses I had, I had, I took along. You know, that was my only contact with anything academic in America.

KS: You must have presented yourself very well.

MR: I must have, I must have, yeah. Because all of a sudden, I knew this was it. And if, if I hadn't been at that meal-

KS: Have you ever regretted into teaching?

200 MR: No, no. That's one of the, the other thing, my children and my teaching are the two things I never regretted, Never, never. No, I don't know what I would have been, what I would, I have no idea. You know, because what I would have done if I didn't have the teaching. I think I would have gone back to be a secretary, I wasn't that great as a secretary, I was just so-so secretary. You know, not too fast on doing things [laughs] and-

KS: That's good (MR: Yeah.). It's, I think a lot of people don't find the career that's right for them.

MR: Yeah, probably not, probably not. Yeah, you are right, I was very lucky, very, very lucky.

KS: I'm glad, I'm glad you found teaching.

MR: Yeah [laughs], thank you [KS laughs], thank you.

KS: Of all the classes you've taught, what's been your favorite class to teach?

MR: I like, I like civilization. And I like Russian, anything Russian. You know, once, once-. I, you know, the advance, a little bit advance. Once 160's gone and all the people who, who are not supposed to be there are gone, yeah, I enjoy that, I really do.

KS: I thought you'd probably tell me either Soviet Literature or-

MR: I do, yeah, I-

KS: -or French Civilization.

MR: Well, yeah. Yeah, that's right, I do like Soviet Literature, I like that. But I like the whole process of teaching. But I must establish a contact with students. I cannot, if I don't have that, I'm not a good teacher. And I know people who don't need that to be good teachers. I don't know why, I really don't know what makes up the difference.

KS: Do you usually find it easy to establish good relationships with your students or-

MR: Yeah, yeah. Well it depends. You, you know, you've heard about my, my, I've had

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some classes that were not good and some that were good. And the same semesters, so it had nothing to do with, with me, I think it's the chemistry of the class. And so I don't know, I think this is what. Several years ago I could have coped better with that. I think with age you cope worse with that. Like you can't climb hills anymore and you can't run ten miles anymore, or something like that. You know, those are the things that come with age. I don't know what it is, I can't explain.

KS: O.K. I meant to ask you and I forgot. Where have you taught besides the University of Maine and Western? Have you taught anywhere else?

MR: Yeah, I taught one summer at Yale and that's it.

KS: Ooo, ---- you.

MR: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KS: [laughs] That's impressive.

MR: Well it was, it was, they asked me to teach. Well yeah, it was to, the glee club, you know, their singing group was going to go to the Soviet Union and to teach them enough Russian so they could get by there.

KS: That would be interesting.

MR: It was, it was. It was, yeah.

KS: O.K.

MR: And they were mainly boys, too. I think they were (KS: Ooo. [laughs]) all boys, so you can imagine [laughs]. And I was younger then.

KS: [laughs] I know, you like those boys.

MR: Yeah, I know, you told me so [KS laughs]. You made me aware of that. You made me aware of the fact that it's obvious.

KS: It's not bad though.

MR: No, no, I'm not ashamed of it, you know.

KS: [laughs] Because the boys love you, too.

MR: That's true too, that's true too. And I, yeah, mm-hmm.

KS: O.K., looking back [MR laughs slightly], what would you say has been your most memorable experience teaching or your most, something that pops into your mind.

250 MR: Well, the first thing, what I told, it's that award I got. I think that was the most memorable. It happened at a good time in my life. My god, it's already eight years ago. But anyway, that, that I thought it was a really culminating point of my career. And also, I cannot say, there's a lot of, I had a lot of rewards, like Phillip sending me roses and the kids coming to the party. I mean it's all, it's a lot of little things, there's no big thing, really.

KS: What's been your best Russian party?

MR: Oh, I can't remember [KS laughs]. I can't tell you. I, I just don't know. I just don't know, you know. I remember this one for that and that one for that. And I don't know.

KS: O.K., I was just curious (MR: Yeah.) if there was one that stuck. I didn't even have that down here.

MR: No, no.

KS: [laughs] You said parties.

MR: Yeah, well [KS laughs], I can't. Well, usually the best is the last because that's the one that's in my mind. And the last one was all right. No, it was not the best, really. No, that, you and I-

KS: I think the last was a little-

MR: Yeah, well, a little odd.

KS: Different, yeah.

MR: Yeah, mm-hmm. But during your time there was some good ones.

KS: Mm-hmm. I really enjoyed Dr. Lehzneff talking (MR: Yeah.) and singing with us (MR: Yeah.). ----- [sounds like "Popple-pablo --- --- ---"] (MR: Yeah, yeah). I really enjoyed that party.

MR: Oh, that was a nice party, yeah.

KS: That was probably my favorite.

MR: Yeah, sure. That was an elegant affair [laughs].

KS: It was real elegant. And it was nice having a real Soviet-

MR: And it was not a pot luck either, was it?

KS: It was semi-pot luck (MR: Yeah.). I mean, you made us fix real Russian food and (MR: Yeah.) you said, "Don't bring me that American stuff." [MR laughs] What's been your worst moment as a teacher? Or have you had a worst movement?

MR: Well I have the, I don't, I didn't have a worst moment, but I had the teacher's blues. You know, when you think [coughs]. You are depressed and you think that nothing is going well and you are not doing a good job. And then I go to the class and into the class and I say, "What's wrong?" Say "Nothing is wrong, everything is O.K., you know." [laughs] So yeah, I had the, I cannot say I had embarrassing moments. I never lost my underwear in class [both laugh]. I never fell down, I never. I had nothing big like that ever. So just little, little frustrations.

KS: O.K.

MR: I'm, yeah, I'm always afraid that [KS laughs] --- ---- and my whole blouse is open. But I [knocks on something] touch wood, touch wood [KS laughs] it never happens [laughs].

KS: O.K. Why have you not retired before now? You've had the opportunity that you could have.

MR: Yeah, yeah. Because I love what I'm doing and I'm afraid then of having to function without it, that's all.

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KS: Do you think when you decide to retire, do you think you'll fully retire, or do you think you'll-

MR: I, so far, I think I will. Up to now I think I don't want half way. I want, I'll get out and I'll be out. I, but I may change my mind. If somebody me offers me something very tempting or whatever. I, the way I see it now, I'm not going to beg for, for any. I talked to Dr. Brown once and he sort of dismissed it so fast that I thought well, that's the was it's going to be.

KS: O.K.

MR: But, as I say, you know, as time goes on, I may change my mind. You never know.

KS: Have you though about retirement, what you'll do after you retire?

300 MR: Well, I'm thinking about it because you know, I'll probably retire a year from now. Yeah, I'm thinking all the time. I don't know, sometimes I think I'll do that, sometimes I'll do that. And I have ideas, I could be doing that, but again I'm not. I, from what I read, I should really know definitely what I would be doing, but I don't.

KS: O.K., so you don't really have any future plans (MR: No, no, no.) or anything. Do you thing you'll remain in Bowling Green or-

MR: Yeah, most likely. I told you, there's no other place. I probably would stay, stay longer in Block Island.

KS: I asked John about moving to Block Island. He said, "It's too cold up there during the winter and too isolated. No."

MR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And you know, and he and I not getting along, it would be-

KS: You don't want to be stuck with him [laughs]-

MR: Suicide, double suicide, yeah [laughs].

313 KS: O.K., I'm going to flip this over.

END OF SIDE ONE.

SIDE TWO

Counter #

[interview continues at counter #177]

177 KS: O.K., now we're on side two.

MR: O.K.

KS: Let's see. What do you see as your greatest accomplishment in life?

MR: Well, I, I, the fact. O.K., now that you know my life, think of my childhood. There was nobody and there were. That the fact my greatest accomplishment is my children, that they are all right. They're fine, maybe they are not, I cannot brag about them being the President or whatever, but they are good, honest human beings, good citizens. And my position here, that-. Personally, I could have done more with my own person. I should have, I think, but socially speaking, that's what I can tell you.

KS: Generally speaking, have you been happy with your life?

MR: Yeah, yeah. I'm happy with my life. Really my unhappiness is myself.

KS: O.K.

MR: I'm glad you asked me that because I never put it in [laughs], in those words. But it's true.

KS: I was going to say it seems after talking to you a lot, you could have been a really sour person (MR: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.) and really disgruntled and forget about everybody. But you're not and you give all the time to people.

MR: Mm-hmm, that's what I enjoy doing. If I just could find that kind of a serenity I should have at my age, I would be happy. And I don't know what to do. Maybe I should become a Baptist [KS laughs]. Go and see that girl [both laugh].

KS: I don't think so.

MR: In the Chinese restaurant [both laugh].

200 KS: It probably wouldn't help, no. O.K. If you had life to live all over, from the very beginning (MR: Yeah.), would you do anything different?

MR: Yeah, I would, I would. When I was young, I think I would have studied more, I would have been more serious about studying. But you know, I didn't know anything about learning or so, yeah, I would have been more serious about certain things, yes.

KS: O.K. Let's see. Oh, do you have any words of wisdom [both laugh slightly] of, of things that, just for someone. O.K., for students now, is there something that you would tell students that are getting ready to start or young married couples.

MR: Oh, for young married couple I have a word. Yes, that I know what to say. That marriage is not an end, it's a beginning. And you have to work at it every day. And [clears throat], you know, the same, same cliché, "Don't ever go to bed mad at each other." But really work at it. That's, I think that's my mistake there. The other words of wisdom, I don't know about jobs and all that because I really don't know anymore what's going on, what people go through and. And it's different anyway, the whole mentality. But I'm very upset about the lack of health that the young people have. You know, eating all that bad food and being ignorant about what's good. And as a consequence, you see more and more sick young people and tired young people. And so that's, that's my only, only subject I can do something about, to open their eyes, they are not aware, Some kids I know are so used to junk food that they think there's nothing else but junk food. That's, that's-

KS: They don't know what vegetable are.

MR: I don't think, I know people who won't eat vegetables, won't eat fruit and won't eat. And also to when you have children, to be responsible for your children. Not have children for, I don't know for what reason. I mean once you have a child, your whole life has to be dedicated to that child, around that child. You don't have to abandon other things, but children are first priority.

KS: O.K. Do you have any closing comments [MR laughs] about any (MR: No.) aspect of your life or-

MR: No, I don't, I don't know how to. This is the first interview in my whole life, so I don't know, I don't know [laughs slightly]. I don't have any flamboyant way of signing

off, but I-

KS: Oh, you don't-

MR: I think, I think you did a good job. And you made me feel good and that's all. And as it's going to be your job to make interviews, I think I want you to know that.

KS: Well thank you.

MR: Mm-hmm.

KS: Now all I have to do is get all this together and-

MR: Well that I don't envy you-

KS: -make a paper.

MR: I hope you'll give me the paper to see. Yeah, mm-hmm.

KS: And if you want a copy, I'll give you a copy of the interviews, too.

MR: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That will be fun to see.

KS: So I guess we'll end it here.

242 MR: O.K., this is it.

END OF SIDE TWO, END OF INTERVIEWS.