

Elizabeth Tolerton

Interview Transcript

Transcribed by Bess Arnold, May 23, 2013, Cheyenne, Wyoming

Subject: Elizabeth Tolerton

Occupation: Dance Instructor

Interviewer: Mark Junge

Place of interview: Cheyenne, Wyoming

Transcriber's notes: I have deleted redundant ands, uhs, buts, you knows, false starts, feedback, non-verbal sounds, etc. if it does not affect the conversation. I have used an em dash (--) to indicate a break in a sentence or resumption of a statement after an interruption. Parentheses are used for non-verbal sounds and if I have corrected a word to say what was intended.

JUNGE: Today is Friday, February 2, 1989. My name is Mark Junge and I am with Elizabeth Tolerton in Cheyenne, Wyoming, at her address here in the Tolerton Studios, which is—

TOLERTON: 2010 Warren Avenue.

JUNGE: 2010 Warren Avenue. Elizabeth, I have some voluminous notes here. I just do want to say one thing before we get started. There was a picture of you that looks very much like Marlene Dietrich.

TOLERTON: (chuckles) I don't know if people remember who Marlene Dietrich was, but she was a very, very famous actress and actually came from Berlin and came to America, and she became a very famous film actress over here.

JUNGE: Was there a "Marlene Dietrich look?"

TOLERTON: Yes, oh, I'm sure. It was kind of like Marilyn Monroe later on.

JUNGE: Okay. There's been a lot written about you. I've gone over all the material that you allowed me to Xerox from your old albums. It seems that you have been interviewed more than half a dozen times at least.

TOLERTON: Oh, more than that in the last thirty-seven years. I have been here thirty-seven years.

JUNGE: Elizabeth, where and when were you born?

TOLERTON: I was born in Germany.

JUNGE: I know you're reluctant, but this is for historical purposes.

TOLERTON: I was born in (Ensfeld?), which is on the Rhine River, and I was born on the fifth of June. I'm a Gemini.

JUNGE: What year?

TOLERTON: Aah. (laughs)

JUNGE: This is for the record.

TOLERTON: No, no. Fifth of June.

JUNGE: I was born on the fifth of June.

TOLERTON: Really?

JUNGE: Yes. Now you have to tell me the date. Okay, you won't tell me the date.

TOLERTON: No. (Both laugh) Go ahead; guess and then I'll say yes or no.

JUNGE: Between sixty and sixty-five.

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm. That's like close. The other way; not up, down.

JUNGE: Down? Less than sixty?

TOLERTON: Mmm, not quite.

JUNGE: Well, we're getting pretty close. You might as well say.

TOLERTON: (Laughs) If I tell my age—you know they always say if a woman tells her age, she will tell everything.

JUNGE: Well, then, we need to know your age.

TOLERTON: No, if you tell it then you can't keep a secret. (both chuckle)

JUNGE: Well, perhaps we could put a blank line there, but this is for historical purposes. Okay? Your parents' names?

TOLERTON: My father's name was—they're both deceased. My parents are dead—Karl Endre's, E-n-d-r-e-accent-s. My father was from (unintelligible) (Lorraine?). This is the country where

most people always say, “Is it French, or is it German?” It’s right on the French border. And my mother’s name was Clara.

JUNGE: What was her maiden name?

TOLERTON: Wimmert. W-i-m-m-e-r-t.

JUNGE: Were they both from the same area in Germany?

TOLERTON: Close, not quite. My father was closer to the French border than my mother, but they both were from the west part of Germany.

JUNGE: Did they meet in (Lorraine?)

TOLERTON: No, they met in Germany close to her home town.

JUNGE: Okay. How long have they been gone?

TOLERTON: My father died in 1948. He was only fifty-four. He had heart problems—in Germany. And then I brought my mother over here and my mother re-married in Germany, and I brought my stepfather and my mother over here and then my mother died. She’s buried here in Cheyenne. She died twenty-five years ago, in ’63, the same year when Kennedy was assassinated. She died on Christmas Eve. Terrible.

JUNGE: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

TOLERTON: I have only one brother. He still lives in Germany. He’s about fifteen months younger than I am. His name is Ernst, Ernst Endre’s and he has one son, (Reiner?). He is twenty-eight.

JUNGE: Reiner?

TOLERTON: Reiner.

JUNGE: Do you get a chance to see your bother?

TOLERTON: Well, I haven’t lately. I haven’t been back in eight years, nine years because Jess hasn’t been feeling well the last seven years. Jess had to get a pacemaker, and so I’m a little bit hesitant to travel, and so I stayed closer, but I haven’t seen my brother that long.

JUNGE: Where did you go to school?

TOLERTON: Well, I went to school in Germany. You see I traveled. I danced professionally under contract when I was five years old, and that was the Children’s Ballet Company. And then, when I was of school age, traveled with the ballet company many, many times. I attended the school if we went there long enough, maybe two weeks. I attended the

school then. Also, I had to have private tutors and it was very strict in Germany. Well, I think here you have the same thing with movie stars. They have tutors on the lot.

JUNGE: You were like a movie star in those days.

TOLERTON: Yes. And I had tutors. And also, the school authorities gave me two different tests each year to see if I'm up on my school work. Well, they would take my work permit away if I wasn't up.

JUNGE: Oh, is that the way it works?

TOLERTON: Yeah.

JUNGE: I see.

TOLERTON: And I think it's the same way here, because they're very strict, or they have been. I don't know what they do now in Hollywood. They have to have so much schooling. They have to work only so many hours, you know, because of the Child Law.

JUNGE: Yes. And you have the equivalent, then, of a high school diploma, or did you have a high school diploma. You did get that?

TOLERTON: Yes, high school diploma, no college, because I work in my education, in my profession, I mean. Yes, but only high school.

JUNGE: You started out--according to one of these articles I read—you started out at age two and a half (unintelligible).

TOLERTON: The littlest toe dancer, but that was when I was five—no, I was six then, because that's very early for a child to be on toes.

JUNGE: But you did start at two and a half.

TOLERTON: Well, my mother trained me. See, my mother was a ballerina. And my mother trained me, and I was two and a half, but that was just, you know, to introduce me to dance. And then at four, she took me to the (Sanford?) Opera House and there were auditions for children to be accepted. See, you cannot just go and say, "Here's my child. I want to register and pay it." You have to audition in the professional school. There are other dance schools where you just go and take dancing classes, but this one is a professional school, so they give the child a regular audition—rhythmic, musicality, they look you over, how you're built and what your body would be like, they measure. Well, they still do it now. So I was four years old and they accepted me.

JUNGE: Did your mother have, in turn, a background of dancing from her mother?

TOLERTON: Yes. I'm the third generation.

JUNGE: That's amazing.

TOLERTON: Well, and that's much so in Europe, not only in the theatre, but in many professions that it goes on to the next and the next and the next in families.

JUNGE: There's that sort of tradition there.

Now I understood from one of your articles that dancing was sort of something that was done by the privileged few.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: What class would you have put yourself in in those days?

TOLERTON: Middle class.

JUNGE: This was something that better families did, right?.

TOLERTON: Yes, and that's different in America, because anybody that would like to try dancing, if they can afford it, they have the opportunity to do so, but over there it's a little bit more screened.

JUNGE: You were lucky, then, to be born in a family that allowed and encouraged you to do that.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: Did your mother recognize your ability as a dancer?

TOLERTON: Not only recognized, but instilled it and exposed me by taking me to ballet and opera and all that. It's like to acquire a taste, the same as for food. If you put something in front of a child and they've never tasted it, how can they tell if they like it or not? It was not forced. Not forced feeding (chuckles) but it was there and you were exposed to it and that was part of your growing up.

JUNGE: So, you really got into it, say, age four or five?

TOLERTON: Age four, definitely, I was accepted at age four and, well, I naturally would have to say because my mother told me that. I was there six months or a year. I was put on a full scholarship and when I was five years old, I was contracted in the Sanford Ballet Company. I was paid.

JUNGE: What company was that?

TOLERTON: Sanford Opera Ballet.

JUNGE: Oh, I see.

TOLERTON: So, at five years, I was a paid artist.

JUNGE: Were you in your element at that time? How did you feel about that, that you had to do it?

TOLERTON: Oh, I believe it was just a natural thing. I cannot remember doing anything else.

JUNGE: I see. Who is (Tajana Gorschke?)

TOLERTON: (Tajana Gorschke?) was a very, very famous dancer and then became a very, very fine teacher in Berlin and also her husband, both of them became great teachers.

JUNGE: She was your teacher?

TOLERTON: She was one of my teachers, yes.

JUNGE: Was she your first teacher?

TOLERTON: No, she was my later teacher. My first teacher was (Ilke?) Petersen, and she was very, very well known.

JUNGE: I was going to ask you about her and Arthur (Schfankel?), they were together, were they?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: As a dance team?

TOLERTON: Yes. Well, they danced together and then Arthur taught. In Europe, there are men classes and there are women classes and then you put them together and you have (unintelligible), so they both worked together.

JUNGE: Who else can you remember in the dance field when you were a kid, when you were growing up?

TOLERTON: Oh, goodness. There are so many. (unintelligible), Konische? now that was a distinct opera in Berlin. It was a different place. There were two girls in Berlin. They were twins, the (Heffner?) twins. They were very, very famous. Marie (unintelligible), she actually came from Hungary as a child in Germany. They didn't only dance in the opera, but in film in which you combine—

JUNGE: You combined acting as well as dancing?

TOLERTON: And that is taught also, you see.

JUNGE: You mentioned a Svenska Film Company. What was the Svenska Film Company?

TOLERTON: It's like the (unintelligible) here. It's a name.

JUNGE: Did they sign you to a contract?

TOLERTON: Yes, and I made two movies in Stockholm.

JUNGE: What were the names of them?

TOLERTON: Well, first I did (unintelligible), which they revived later and they did another movie. Just a moment. I have to think about it. Everything that flows in the air (unintelligible). I cannot get the name; and it's called (unintelligible) in German, people without—

JUNGE: Legs that support—gravity.

TOLERTON: Gravity. There you go. People without gravity. So you float through the air and they show different things and so I was in the dance and you leap and you just stay there like you are suspended in the air.

JUNGE: Were you a member of the dance troupe?

TOLERTON: No, I was a soloist and they would actually come into the classroom to see how it is I developed. Like, for instance, a leap. You just don't jump. It has to have a plié. I mean, you bend and then take—now they do the same thing now. They try to teach that to many of the athletes because proper takeoff and proper landing, (both chuckle), it sounds like an airplane, but less injuries if you really know how to control your body.

JUNGE So you traveled all around Europe?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: As part of the Frankfurt—

TOLERTON: Ballet Company.

JUNGE: Opera ballet, or ballet?

TOLERTON: It was connected with the opera.

JUNGE: What was life like when you were traveling all over Europe?

TOLERTON: Well, it was like any kind of show business, you know, you go to the city and you go into a new theatre, and you have to check the stage and lights and you get ready, and you go back to the hotel, and you go and perform and you practice and warm up. There was very little life. You don't make friends. You don't have time.

JUNGE: Did you feel at that time that you had an unusual childhood?

TOLERTON: No, because many people said, "Isn't that too bad that you didn't have the childhood, you couldn't play?" But, you see, many of the children, the young people, later on when I was a teenager, that I was with, they lived the same life. I didn't know the difference. That's why I always say when I came to America and got married; I never lived just in one place. I had neighbors and I didn't know what to talk about with these people I had

to learn. I call it my second life. My first life was an entirely different life. It was theatre and glamour and all that. And I became a house frau in America and lived a so-called “normal” life. I don’t know if that’s normal or not.

JUNGE: Do you think—going back to Germany now—do you think that there was a German tradition of dancing, a good, solid classical German tradition in dancing?

TOLERTON: Well, sometimes the big debate is was it really that classical as Russia? Well, I guess Russia was more on the classical side, and Germany then, like Mary Wiegman, she was one of the very, very early modern, so called, modern dancers.

JUNGE: Who’s that, Mary—

TOLERTON: Mary Wiegman, W-i-e-g-m-a-n, and Harold (Kreitzburg?), and I did study, to go back to my first teaching, you ask who my first teacher was, and later you become more versatile in dance, you try to study with different art forms, and like we had to also take modern dance, which was very unusual for a classically trained dancer, but my teacher, this Ilke Petersen had some tremendous foresight. I mean, we go back a few years that she felt that if you are in the profession, you just don’t do the classical, you have to know a little bit of everything. That’s why Baryshnikov and many of the Russian dancers left Russia to come to America so you are allowed to take different types of dancing.

JUNGE: What about the German mentality? I’m German. I’ve studied a little bit about Germany. There seems to be this penchant for discipline. For regimen. I mean, did you have that issue growing up?

TOLERTON: Oh, you know, many people say, “Oh, isn’t that too much on a child?” And I would say, “No, I would not change anything.” I mean, I would change the war. I wish we didn’t have to go through that, but my life, my private life, no. Because I think it really makes you more appreciative of life, because you have a pattern, it’s organized, and it’s not just helter-skelter. I think I’m a happier, more organized person because of it.

JUNGE: And it helped you in your teaching as well, clear through life.

TOLERTON: Oh, definitely.

JUNGE: When did all that change for you, all that traveling about Europe? I think you were sort of the star of the show, the star of the family, you know, and—

TOLERTON: That’s right.

JUNGE: Well, getting used to that is one thing, but on the other hand, it's also a rather traumatic thing to [go through].

TOLERTON: Yeah, but Alfred and I will tell you that my mother was quite—and my father too—but my mother was a very strict disciplinarian. I might be the star on the stage, but when I got off that stage, I was the little girl, and I was a child, and there were rules and regulations, like, oh, my goodness, when I was a teenager, my goodness, dating or anything like that was just no.

JUNGE: Did she see you as an extension of herself?

TOLERTON: I'm sure.

JUNGE: And she wanted you to be maybe what she couldn't be?

TOLERTON: Well, she was close to it, but you see, my mother married when she was twenty-two, so she didn't go on and then she had me and my brother was born, so she actually finished up her career. So, you're right, it was an extension of that.

JUNGE: But she was a very good teacher.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: And she expected you to toe the line.

TOLERTON: You better believe it. (chuckles) And when she came over here to America, many people that met her, and there's still some of the mothers and friends here in Cheyenne, well, when Mama came in, she had an air about her, not arrogance. You see, there's a very small line between arrogance and confidence and when she came in, you could see that automatically. And I can see lots of me from my mother.

JUNGE: Really?

TOLERTON: Yeah.

JUNGE: In what way, for example?

TOLERTON: Well, like I said, it's not arrogance, but I have, I am a pretty well-assured person because of my accomplishments in life that carried over. I never felt the movement of equality, women and men, being suppressed, whatever. I was always a liberated woman. When they talk about liberated women and when it came out, I said, "What does it mean?" I couldn't see anything at all. I was already liberated.

JUNGE: (Laughs) That's good. Did you pick up any of her mannerisms?

TOLERTON: (Laughs) Yes, I think, yes. I catch myself.

JUNGE: Did Jess remind you of that?

TOLERTON: Well, he says, you know, “That sounds like Mama.” Sometimes it’s good and sometimes it’s bad. (Both laugh)

JUNGE: Well, I guess I missed on the other question, but where did things change for you?

TOLERTON: Well, definitely the war--the war in 1939 in September. And I was on tour in England, and that was ’38—well, I was on tour almost every year we went to England and Scandinavia, Switzerland and Italy, whatever, and I was, gosh, I can’t remember the dates. Isn’t that amazing how dates-- I was in England when Hitler went into Austria and then Czechoslovakia, and then I was in Copenhagen when the war broke out on the 1st of September. We came back from Copenhagen the 9th into Germany. That’s when the Polish—

JUNGE: Invaded, yeah, the Blitzkrieg.

TOLERTON: Well, they said they invaded us, you know. It was an entirely different story. (Laughs).

JUNGE: Oh, it was?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah, naturally, Hitler and the Nazis said that Poland started the whole thing.

JUNGE: How could they start it when he sent planes over to (unintelligible).

TOLERTON: Well, that wasn’t known, you see. This came out later.

JUNGE: Propaganda.

TOLERTON: Oh, yes. Many people, you know, will do many different things. I mean, how do you know? We had censors. The newspapers were censored and how do you know? Now when I was in Sweden, that came later, it was neutral. Sweden was neutral, like Switzerland. Then you could see the different papers, like the *London Times*, and you saw the movies and the film, and news, so you could kind of make up your mind with that. We saw this part, we saw the German part, you know, from the whole world how it developed. In Germany, you only read and heard what you were supposed to.

JUNGE: Prague Newspaper, or whatever?

TOLERTON: Oh, any in Berlin they were all censored. The people, they say, “How can that happen in a country?” ever since I lived in America. Well, it happened. They say, “How can it happen?” And I say, “Well, it happened because it was a dictatorship.”

JUNGE: Well, what was your reaction at the time of the invasion? Did it affect you at all?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah, because many of the theatres were closed, you know. He closed them down. When the all-out war started, now, it wasn't that bad then, but later many of the theatres were closed and they maybe left one or two in one great big city, like Berlin, opened and everybody was supposed to go to the factories and help to work on ammunitions.

JUNGE: To support the war effort?

TOLERTON: That's right. I was very fortunate that I wasn't taken away from my profession.

JUNGE: You kept on dancing?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: Well, all the theatres were closed.

TOLERTON: Well, I know, but some of them were open. But also, we had USO shows just like you did.

JUNGE: I see. So life sort of went on for you.

TOLERTON: Yes, almost, but the bombings, the destruction, the rationing of food and clothing--we were bombed out seven different times.

JUNGE: While you were on tour?

TOLERTON: Yes. That's why I was in big cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Leipzig, and then the biggest one, Cologne, the biggest one was Dresden. I was in the Dresden bombing.

JUNGE: Do you remember much about that?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah, sure. I was a teenager at the time. It was hell. Nothing but hell.

JUNGE: In what way? That you could never get to sleep, or—

TOLERTON: Oh, night and day, and that broke everything down in Europe because the British bombed in the daytime or at night, it depends, and then the Americans started with the next round, so it was constant down in the air shelter and up and down again.

JUNGE: Did you lose friends?

TOLERTON: Oh, yes, many. I also lost friends in concentration camps.

JUNGE: You were lucky.

TOLERTON: Yeah.

JUNGE: You weren't Jewish.

TOLERTON: No.

JUNGE: What faith are you?

TOLERTON: Well, I was a Lutheran, and I'm now Episcopalian.

JUNGE: You were Lutheran and now you're Episcopalian.

TOLERTON: Well, my husband was Episcopalian, so I was baptized Lutheran. When I came here I became Episcopalian. I thought he would go to church with me. (Laughs) He did for a while, but he's not a good church-goer. He goes maybe, oh, I don't know how many times a year.

JUNGE: I don't want to spend too much more time here, because we have a lot of things to cover, but I'm interested in the fact that you were giving performances in some of the big theatres like Winter Garden, (Skala?)

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm. Well, it would be like Broadway, Radio City Music Hall.

JUNGE: There was a command performance in front of the King and Queen of England.

TOLERTON: That's right, at the Palladium in London.

JUNGE: You were on top of your game.

TOLERTON: My profession, yes, as a young girl, too.

JUNGE: Did you get used to all that?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah, but it didn't give me a big head because, as I said, my mother always kept me right, as a normal person, so to speak. Not to be too full of myself.

JUNGE: Do you have any memories, Elizabeth, of your experiences in those places, any unusual occurrences or people that you met, or really impressionable events that were forever burned in your memory?

TOLERTON: Actually—and this is not arrogance—but you kind of took it all in stride.

JUNGE: Even going before the King and Queen?

TOLERTON: Yeah.

JUNGE: It was nothing special.

TOLERTON: Well, it was a great experience, but (unintelligible).

JUNGE: Who were the King and Queen?

TOLERTON: Elizabeth's father, George, and the old Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

JUNGE: I see. Now your career ended in Germany when—during the war, after the war?

TOLERTON: During the war.

JUNGE: As a dancer, is what I mean.

TOLERTON: Oh, well, I did perform. I met my husband. Jess saw me perform at the opera in Nurnberg because that was during the war time. He was a pilot and flew from England.

JUNGE: What is the story on this? You have talked about this before.

TOLERTON: Yes, he was stationed in England and flew a B-17, and bombed. Later when we met—well, he came back after the war from Germany back to America and then re-enlisted and went back to Germany and he was in the C.I.C., Counter-Intelligence Corps. And so, he was stationed close to Nurnberg investigating people. So that was during the occupation, so I performed at Nurnberg. That's when the war trials went on, and so that was in '46-'47, and actually he was the first person that I rarely ever dated. (Chuckles)

JUNGE: You didn't have what you'd say is a normal dating life in the theatre as a teenager.

TOLERTON: No, and also, you see, I have to go back to my mother. "If you go out, then they say 'she's out with him, and him, and him.'" And when you're in show business the reputation you have to protect yourself much more than any debutante, so they say it's very, very--they say that she's very popular she's a debutant. And if you're in the theatre, it has another meaning. (Chuckles) So my mother was very strict, very strict.

JUNGE: So, your met and fell in love with the first man that you really dated.

TOLERTON: With Jess, and I married. Anyway, that was in Nurnberg and he saw me perform and I was introduced to him by a colonel and his wife. Really, we had nothing in common, I thought. Nothing at all. He was just an American fly boy full of himself, and I thought he was very arrogant. (Laughs) Then I worked for the USO for the Special Services because I knew some entertainers, so I put shows together for the different officers clubs. So, I had maybe eight or nine different groups going at the same time, so I managed that because it was my profession. I had been in show business for so long. So then I started putting that together and instead of taking pay, it was food, clothing. It was nothing. So I had a contract with the Special Services USO show that, instead of paying me so much, I would like to have PX privileges and also commissary privileges, so we had our food and whatever we needed, so he couldn't bribe me with either cigarettes or nylons or something like that. (Laughs). So that was quite a courtship, I tell you.

JUNGE: Well, explain how you first made eye contact, or came into contact with each other.

TOLERTON: Well, that was after the performance. There was a party and I said, "How do you do." My mother was there. My mother traveled with me, and we were talking and he said if

he could take me out to dinner. My Mama said, “Well, why don’t you join us for dinner?” (Laughs)

And, so, that’s how it started. He joined us.

JUNGE: She wasn’t about to let you get out of her sight.

TOLERTON: No, that’s very true, and Jess learned to respect her very much, believe me.

JUNGE: Tell me the story about the bombing. You found out that your husband had bombed you.

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah. Later when we dated, and he checked his missions that he flew, and he found out that he was in the same place several times, maybe two or three different cities that he bombed. I was there at the same time.

JUNGE: What was your reaction?

TOLERTON: Well, really nothing. I didn’t hate. It was an all-out war. The Germans did the same thing.

JUNGE: You just overlooked it.

TOLERTON: Yes. What can you do? I mean, you have to be intelligent enough to see. The Germans did horrible, horrible things and people do horrible things when there’s a war. I’m going to tell you something. I’m not going to mention the name. Remind me about Dresden. I have something important to say to you. What I was going to say to you. We talked about the bombings. Anyway, that’s when Jess and I found out and he asked me. No, there was no animosity at all because war is war. But I found out, and I will not tell you the name. There is one person living here in Cheyenne. He is very well known and I have known him for many, years. I had his children in my school, and they are all grown now, and somebody mentioned this summer to me, “Did you know that Mr. So-and-so was overseas?” Because I talked about the war. This person said to me, “Well, did you know that he flew the raid over Dresden?” And I said, “You mean—we had known each other?” I never knew anything about it. And he actually doesn’t want to have it known. That’s one of his most horrible nightmares and I confronted him one day. We just ran into each other at Little America and I said, “I understand that you and I were at the same place on the 13th of February, 1945.” And he looked at me and he said, “(unintelligible) “You were up in the sky and I was down. I’m talking about Dresden.” And I tell you, that man, he said he had never met anyone that was in that air raid. It was just horrible. It was one of the biggest. And he said, “You know, Elizabeth, to this day this is my

worst nightmare,” and he had tears in his eyes, and I said, “Don’t worry about it.” I wanted to make him feel more comfortable about it. War is war. I mean, I can feel very, very bad about the things the Germans did and he said, “Boy, I haven’t gotten over that to this day.

JUNGE: You haven’t either.

TOLERTON: No, because I don’t want to look at war movies. Why? Because it brings back horrible memories. (unintelligible).

JUNGE: Do you have nightmares too?

TOLERTON: I did have. Oh, when I came here I had terrible nightmares. You know sometimes too where we lived, a backfire of a truck or something. I mean, I just jumped. So it took a long time. Like a wound that has a scar and a (tear?), but underneath it’s there.

JUNGE: Yes. This is interesting because the impression I got from the newspaper articles I read was that this was sort of a joke. It wasn’t a joke. I mean, between you and Jess, the fact that he was above and you were below. It was kind of a cute story, but it also (unintelligible)

TOLERTON: No. At the time, it was horrible because you’re scared to death. The air alarm goes off and “My gosh, is this the time that I’m going to get it?” But then you have to take it then in stride. We never had any kind of hate about the war or anything between Jess and myself. (unintelligible) “How could you do that?” My brother was drafted and he was in the motor. He drove a truck. He wasn’t in the Air Force, but was in the motor.

JUNGE: Motorized.

TOLERTON: And he ended up in Stalingrad and he was one of the last ones to get out on the last plane because he was wounded to get out. So, he was in the war.

JUNGE: You also tell a story about being on the Elbe River when the war ended.

TOLERTON: That was in Dresden, and also I have to tell you this. My mother’s tremendous foresight, how should I say, organization. She said, “Okay, now we—the bombs flew and it was all fire bombs in Dresden like so many of the old cities in Europe. The streets are so terribly narrow and all the buildings are one house to the next. They’re all building together. And we went to, I forget now, four or five different—we were in one house and each house is a big home, they had one or two squares in the wall in the basement and they had bricks that you could push through your body so one or two people could crawl through

the crawl space to go to the next house. So, people say, “Well, didn’t you go out in the street?” Well, no. These houses are built next to each other so you push through. So we pushed through those and finally you just carry what you can carry, mostly your life, and your own body. And we got out, and she said, “Okay, we’re going to go that direction, and, thank God, it happened that we walked out of the city away from it and we came to the Elbe River, which is right in the city, but there was smoke and fire. When you’re in the water, it helps. You can breathe. So we walked on the Elbe River out of the city. We had our coats and put them in the water because of the heat, put it over your head. In a couple of seconds it was dry, that’s how much heat there was.

JUNGE: You were walking in the Elbe River?

TOLERTON: In the water away from the city.

JUNGE: What side were you on?

TOLERTON: On the Dresden side?

JUNGE: So, the Russians were coming from one side.

TOLERTON: Well, they were not there yet, but we walked out of the city and so then we ended up in a small town and everything. There was no organization then. See, why they bombed Dresden, there was nothing there. There were no factories or—the only thing that was there, it was a tremendous railroad connection to everywhere, and that’s why they wanted it. It was the last kill, the last thing. And so then the next morning everybody was looking for their family. We were together, my mother, my father were together. My brother, we didn’t know where he was in Stalingrad, and we didn’t know where he was at all. And so, when we were out of the city we waited to get a train to get out from the little town further away from this small town. Well, then we went to Balshamba which was a small town and there we were about six weeks or eight weeks, and then we heard that the Russians were coming, and we said, “Well, the Americans are not going to let them come that far, because we thought they would stop them right on the Elbe River. Well, they came across on this side, but we took off the day before and moved and really walked. We walked toward (Huff?) close to Nurnberg, and we came on “no man’s land.” They called it “no-man’s land because it was the bridge they wanted to have some kind of (unintelligible) to that bridge and here we could look over the bridge and saw the Americans on the other side. Like I said to you before, I spoke English, so that helped,

and I went over and we met in the middle of the bridge, and I had some other friends, entertainers. This is how the whole happened. I said, “We are actors and we want to go on the other side.” And they said, “Well, you have to talk to our commanding officer and you have to come back.” I had to come back that evening. It must have been about five or six o’clock. And so, the commanding officer, who was a captain, I guess, if I’m not mistaken. And I said, “Well, we have seven or eight people here,” and I was an opera singer. And I said, “Actually, if you would let us come over, we would entertain. You know, we did do USO shows in Germany like you.” And that was the (unintelligible). They hadn’t had any (unintelligible), so that’s how we got across there to entertain.

JUNGE: Did he doubt you, this captain?

TOLERTON: No, not at all, because I told him what I would to entertain. We had some things we needed to improvise, naturally, and he said, “That’s fine.” Two of the entertainers were Italian and the others were German, so they let us go across. That was another lucky—

JUNGE: Yeah. I’m just curious. Do you think that your learning poise and self-discipline helped you at that precise time?

TOLERTON: Oh, definitely. Yes, that’s right.

JUNGE: It’s probably at a very critical time.

TOLERTON: It was critical, very critical, and that definitely—well, like I told you, I wasn’t afraid or anything. My mother was with me and we were there, (chuckles) and I could speak English. I could explain myself.

JUNGE: Did you speak more than English? Did you speak Spanish?

TOLERTON: Well, a little bit. When you travel, you speak a little bit of everything. My best language besides German was English.

Part 2

(PHONE ETIQUETTE)

(Simulated phone call)

(Phone Rings)

TOLERTON: Tolerton School of Dance. Hi. Yeah, I’m Elizabeth Tolerton. How old is your child? Two years old? No, we don’t take them that young. That’s a little young. Usually we start them—No, don’t wait a month. You have to wait a little longer. Usually we take the children about three and a half or four. Is your child in pre-school? Well, usually that

is the way to do that. But, why don't we do that? Maybe you could bring her in to my school. Who am I speaking to, please? Mrs. Smith. Why don't you bring her in and she could visit here and then we could include her in some of the exercises, and then we could go from there. If she's not ready it wouldn't be worth your money to spend on something that she is not really interested in or ready for, actually. Well, yes, why don't we do that? Thank you so much. I'll see you then. Goodbye.

JUNGE: (Both laugh). That was great. Very good. Very good. Well, what I think we should determine here is what happened to your career, because you still dance, you say. Even today you do a little dancing.

TOLERTON: Oh, I definitely show-- when I teach, I demonstrate, yeah.

JUNGE: But was the war effective in cutting short your career?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah. Well, actually, I was on top of my career, let's say, anyway. But, it did. It changed my life, yeah.

JUNGE: How old were you when Dresden took place? Were you like a teenager?

TOLERTON: Yes, I was a teenager.

JUNGE: Okay.

TOLERTON: And so, actually, when the war ended we were in Erlangen close to Nurnberg, and then I still danced, like I told you, in Nurnberg, and also I arranged shows for the USO program. So I still performed then for the Americans.

JUNGE: Were you frustrated because you couldn't dance?

TOLERTON: Well, it was an entirely different change, yeah. You were limited to such small--You couldn't be international, which I was.

JUNGE: Going back, in hindsight now of your career, do you look with regret on that time?

TOLERTON: No, no. Because I feel I finished it, really, on top, and there comes a time. So, naturally, I knew I was going to be something else. I didn't know if I was going to America or if I was going to stay over there. It was also from day to day, really. You lived from day to day, and so things happened, so I decided, you know. Jess and I became more serious. So I said, "Well, I'm sure if I live in America, I'm not just going to sit in the house. I'm going to do something. So, there comes the drive which I learned at an early age; that you have to be doing something or be successful. You *vil* do that.

JUNGE: You *vil. Jah.*" Could you have been a prima ballerina—you were a prima ballerina.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: But could you have continued your career had things been (unintelligible)?

TOLERTON: Oh, I'm sure I would have gone on under normal circumstances. Sure, I would have gone on several more years I'm sure.

JUNGE: Would you have preferred that?

TOLERTON: Not when I look back now. How my life turned out, it completely changed. No, I'm perfectly satisfied with what happened.

JUNGE: Now, you're a master of etiquette. How would you rate Jess's proposal to you?

TOLERTON: Well, now Jess came from a very, very nice home. He had very good breeding, and I recognized that in him when we met him. He's from Springfield, Missouri, originally and I could tell, I mean, it doesn't mean language barrier or anything. You can tell if a person has good breeding.

Even if you don't understand the language, it's just the mannerisms and, like I said, he was a young fly boy and loved the ladies. And I recognized that too, believe me. I was a little bit leery about him. I called him "American Casanova."

JUNGE: (Laughs) Did he propose to you in London?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: And told you that you would be coming back to America?

TOLERTON: Yes. And I said I didn't know if I wanted to do that, and I came over here on a visa, visiting visa and I visited friends in Kansas City while Jess got stationed in Omaha at Offutt, so we saw (unintelligible) each other. I was here, like I said with old friends of my family.

JUNGE: So you flew over just to visit with some friends.

TOLERTON: Yes, because I had never been in America and I knew my prestige definitely was in Germany, not here. There I was known. Over here, I was just another person and so I did have to think about that and leave my family and my country. It was quite a decision to make, and get married. Especially my family, because I was very close. It was a tremendous decision. I don't know how I did it. I guess love conquered. (Both laugh)

JUNGE: You eventually, though, made the decision. You told your mother that you were going to come over here.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: What was her reaction?

TOLERTON: Well, she just thought, here was this young—I guess he was a lieutenant at the time. She liked him very much, but she didn't think that that was the right thing to do for me. Like any mother, maybe she thought that I should have a prince. Well, he is a prince, really, without the real title, but he's a prince. But then later, I just thought that was what I should do and I came over here and we got married. I got married in America.

JUNGE: When did you get married?

TOLERTON: Well, we've been married thirty-seven years, so '51-2

JUNGE: '52. This is '89.

TOLERTON: Oh, gosh. (Laughs)

JUNGE: Don't forget your anniversary now.

TOLERTON: I do usually, but he remembers. So we were married over anyway, then my mother-- I mentioned that my father died, and my mother was a widow. I didn't see my mother for seven years, and she remarried an old friend of ours. We brought them both over here, and then they lived here, so we were all together in America. That was quite an adjustment for me. That's when I started teaching. I had nothing to do and we lived here in Cheyenne. Jess waited for his papers to get out of the Air Force. He spent nine years in the Air Force. So that's how we came to Cheyenne to the base to get out of the Air Force.

JUNGE: You didn't come to Cheyenne first, though.

TOLERTON: Oh, no. We were in Kansas City, Omaha, and then we were transferred to Topeka, Kansas, and then Minot, North Dakota. I'd never heard of Minot nor Cheyenne, and after Minot, North Dakota, we came here and so we waited and actually we were not planning at all to stay here because Jess, like I said, is not from here, but one thing led to another and he wanted to go back to college, so he did. He went over to Laramie and started out in geology; graduated from there in geology, and then he wanted to go back to George Washington University, and he said, "Maybe I'll go back to Laramie and go to law school. So, he went into law school and graduated from law school.

JUNGE: What part of the country is Jess from?

TOLERTON: Springfield, Missouri.

JUNGE: He didn't want to go back to that part of the country?

TOLERTON: No, because his father died and his mother was remarried, so there was nothing there for him.

JUNGE: So, when he was getting a degree in geology at the University of Wyoming, you were living in Laramie?

TOLERTON: We lived over here and he commuted. I started teaching dance here in Cheyenne, and then when he started law school, that's when we moved over to Laramie because it was just a little bit harder to. I taught in Laramie also. I had a school in Laramie.

JUNGE: Was that your first school?

TOLERTON: No, Cheyenne was my first school.

JUNGE: In 1952?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: So, you taught in Laramie by commuting over there. Did you rent a place?

TOLERTON: Yes --the ballroom at the Elk's Club. (Chuckles) I also taught in Kimball, Nebraska, and commuted to Kimball, Nebraska.

JUNGE: And Casper?

TOLERTON: Oh, that went later. I did cotillion, that's when I taught dance cotillions at the (unintelligible) and I taught ballroom dancing in Casper, flew to Billings, Montana twice and I had about 150 students there, then, let me see, three country clubs in Denver, also cotillions.

JUNGE: The Pinehurst?

TOLERTON: The Pinehurst. Well, the Denver Country Club, Pinehurst, and Boulder Country Club.

JUNGE: Cherry Hills?

TOLERTON: Cherry Hills, and then in Boulder the country club, in Greeley the country club, and in Cheyenne I taught the cotillions here at the Hitching Post.

JUNGE: We're compressing this time down to a small fraction of the amount of time, but were you constantly coming and going?

TOLERTON: That's right.

JUNGE: You could not sit still.

TOLERTON: No, that's right (chuckles). I had so many—when I think back, also between the cotillions, I still had the school, classes here that went on, so I did train some of my older students to become teachers to assist me.

JUNGE: Elizabeth, can you tell me about your first thoughts of opening up a school? Who encouraged you?

TOLERTON: Yeah. This really wasn't meant to be at all, because we were not meant to live in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Jess planned to go back to George Washington University. So, he said, "Well, we're not going to be here very long, so in my neighborhood I just took in girls, three of them, and had them come. Well, I visited the so-called dancing classes. They're kind of traveling teachers that came one day to town and taught. I looked at it, and I said, "Oh, my God, it's almost sacrilegious what they did. I mean, they just did their own thing. There was very little training. They didn't have any background and they said, "This is ballet." The tap dancing, they knew how to shuffle their feet, I suppose, but with ballet that was a little different. So, I said, "Oh, my gosh. I would never open a school, and then all the mommies sat in the class and they were knitting and some were drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, and then "Susie, you're on the wrong foot." And if that would happen to me, I would say, "Lady, if you would like to teach your child, why don't you take her and teach her at home?" So, these teachers, there was no discipline, no, no—no know-how.

JUNGE: No professionalism.

TOLERTON: No professionalism. So, I just took these three little neighborhood children. I didn't charge them anything. I had nothing to do all day. We don't have any children. That was my outlet, and I had these children. By the end of the week, I had sixteen free students. (Laughs) And so, Jess said, "If you really want to do something with your time, why don't you rent a place and then charge for it, because in America if you get it for free, they think it's not worth much." And so, he was right. So, I went to see the hall over at St. Mark's Episcopal Church and I started teaching there. So, that's how it started, and then I got so big that I rented a studio here on Warren, 1801 Warren, next to the Driftwood Café, and then had a regular school. But Jess always said, "Now, don't encourage these people that you're going to be here next year. It would be dishonest because I don't know if we're going to be here." So after thirty-seven years, we are still here.

JUNGE: Amazing. You were at Pete's Pizza?

TOLERTON: That's right. That was my studio.

JUNGE: I see. And then you bought this because there was a house attached to it?

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm.

JUNGE: Was this building here?

TOLERTON: It was not the house. We rented that. It was just a regular home and then we did it and turned it into a regular studio.

JUNGE: Was Jess happy with you decided to do?

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm. Very supportive and all his partners and the whole thing. Me with him and him with me.

JUNGE: I see.

TOLERTON: But it helped him also, because his G.I. Bill ran out after geology, so it helped him to go to law school.

JUNGE: So now he's a lawyer and you're a dancer.

TOLERTON: That's right.

JUNGE: Did you continue to dance at all in any of the performances that your students gave?

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm. I danced at some of my recitals.

JUNGE: Do you still do that?

TOLERTON: No.

JUNGE: What did you stop for?

TOLERTON: Oh, I said maybe I don't want to show off my talent, I wanted to show off my students' talents. I mean, that's what this recital is all about, so parents could judge their children. But I did the first couple of years. I did perform so they could see what I looked like when I performed.

JUNGE: Perhaps to give them confidence that you were--

TOLERTON: Yeah, that I'm qualified.

JUNGE: Qualified. Absolutely.

Boy, you covered a lot of ground, and very quickly. That's great.

I would like to know the difference—and these are terms that are thrown about by people, or at least that I read about—and I don't understand the (unintelligible). There are a number of different dances. What is ballet, as opposed to toe, as opposed to modern?

TOLERTON: Ballet is just the very beginning. It actually is the foundation, like if you build a house, you gotta' have a foundation then you build on it. And the ballet training is in soft ballet

shoes. The regular soft, pink ballet slippers. After years of training in ballet, then you try out toe, point, they call it point, p-o-i-n-t. Toe dancing is another more advanced form of ballet. That's the highest. That's the most advanced form of ballet, and placement of the body, not only coordination, but balance, strength, the ultimate of ballet.

JUNGE: Modern dance?

TOLERTON: Modern dancing, we call that interpretive dancing, like they do it in college. They call it interpretive dancing, which is also a very good form to be free, more free of movement. In the ballet, everything is so strict, there is a straight line and precise. Modern dance it is very important in later life. Like I said, Mary Wiegman, my first teacher, I mentioned, had tremendous foresight that you need it all to become a dancer because it was frowned on. Classical dancers looked down on the modern dancers because, like with modern art, or whatever, what does it mean?

JUNGE: It was an American innovation, wasn't it?

TOLERTON: No, no. It started in Germany and then become Duncan, Isadora Duncan and all that they kind of said, "here's the rain. This is a tree, and the raindrops are falling.

JUNGE: Interpretive.

TOLERTON: And we kinda' thought with tongue in cheek, it's very odd, but it's very helpful if it's done right. But now in our time, modern dancers are trained classical dancers first.

JUNGE: Tap?

TOLERTON: Tap dancing is definitely an American dance form which was created and founded by Black Americans. And they called it, well, not hoofing, even before that they called it clogging, and so they started with wooden shoes. And the story, I don't really that it happened with the Blacks when they were in jail, for their own rhythm, they started with their feet and then it started from clogging, became definitely an American dance form.

JUNGE: Ballroom dancing?

TOLERTON: International. That's international. It started in the courts in Europe years and years and years ago, from the minuet on. We go way back.

JUNGE: Cotillion?

TOLERTON: Cotillion is a very old form of, well, social behavior. Etiquette.

JUNGE: More than just dance.

TOLERTON: Oh, definitely. How to treat a lady. How to ask a lady to dance.

JUNGE: While we're on that, if I throw a situation out to you, can you give me some very brief instructions? Now you already showed via two phone calls how to conduct yourself properly by telephone, but I'd like Elizabeth Tolerton to give me an example of how to conduct myself at the refreshment table.

TOLERTON: Mm-hmm. Well, now, you see, in America—when I first came to America, and I saw Americans eat in Europe also, the table manners, how to hold your fork and knife, already one of the big things that is different. The European way is actually the easiest way to dine—how to manipulate your fork and knife. In America you have your fork in the left hand usually, if you are right-handed, your knife in your right hand. Okay, you start cutting your meat, you put your knife down on the plate, then you switch your fork from the left hand over to the right hand. You pick up and eat it, and then you put your fork back in the left hand. It's back and forth and back and forth. It's such switching back and forth. In Europe when you dine, you cut your meat and you eat with your left hand with the fork and put it down, and then cut again, so it's not that switching back and forth. So, I had to learn—people looked at me because I ate that way, and you can tell the European way to eat. I thought: "Well, maybe these people don't know the right table manners. I learned to eat back and forth like the Americans do. I switched. But the easiest way, and this is in many of the etiquette books, if you want to read up on it, is the European way, not the switching back and forth. There's too much confusion. And also, toothpicks. That's one of the things I teach my students if they have cotillion and we go on dance conventions and we dine together at night. We go out to eat and I definitely correct them. And toothpicks—there are only two places that you should use toothpicks. One is in the bathroom and one is when you hide in the closet.

JUNGE: (Laughs) Well, Wyoming's pretty bad about toothpicks then.

TOLERTON: Yes. Well, and then if the adults do it, why shouldn't the children do it? They learn it from their parents. Same way with language. Many Americans, it's such a nice language, English. But now in Europe, we speak the more British English, and I had a hard time with the American slang, believe me. And, for instance, use of (unintelligible). And in Germany, when I met some of the American wives, they naturally wanted to know the war, what is it? How was it, and how did you feel about it? So, I explained. Nobody really wins a war. Nobody wants to lose fathers, brothers and husbands, and so

one of the ladies said, “You can say that again.” So I repeated the whole story, because I thought she did not understand me. (laughs). So Jess said, “No, this is just a saying that means they agree with you.”

JUNGE: (Laughs.)

TOLERTON: See, those kinds of things. But, anyway, I do correct my students in the language. But the parents don’t speak English correctly either. “Where is it at?” The “at” is not necessary. “Where is it?”

JUNGE: Does it grate on you to see somebody with a toothpick hanging out of their mouth, things like that?

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: Your mother taught you, is that where you picked this up?

TOLERTON: Yes. My upbringing. Now Jess came from America. He had a very good upbringing. It’s the home. If the parents do it and use that poor English, why wouldn’t the children do it, or manners? It’s the home.

JUNGE: What about the situation in asking a person to dance at a cotillion, or whatever?

TOLERTON: Or wherever you go, even in a nightclub, it’s “Excuse me, may I have this dance, please?” If the lady would say yes, you go up to help her to the dance floor and you have the nice regular dance position, and don’t hang around the neck. You take a regular dance position (laughs). And then you take her back to the seat, you don’t let her just walk by herself, and say, “Thank you very much.” If the lady does not want to dance, then she says, “No, thank you very much. I don’t care to.” But then she should not get up and she’s waiting for the other guy to ask her, then get up and dance. That’s very poor manners.

JUNGE: I see. So does the fellow introduce himself, or does she introduce herself?

TOLERTON: No way. If he’s a stranger, he says, “May I dance with you?” And she says yes, and he says “Hi, my name is so-and-so, and she says, “My name is so-and-so.” Now if they know each other already, there’s no introduction. But in a formal—if you’re going through a receiving line maybe—Okay, there are two ways that I teach receiving lines. It’s different if you’re standing and you’re receiving guests; then you introduce the person next to you. If you’re going through it, there are two different ways. You say, “Hello, my name is so-and-so, if there is no one there to introduce you, you say, “Hello,

may I introduce my wife or my lady friend.” There are two different ways. Also, with refreshments—girls have to learn how to (unintelligible) and also the boys have to ask, “Would you like to have some refreshments?” So the boys have to go to the punch line and then bring it to her. She has to say thank you. The same with seating. They have to seat the girl and help her up. Help her with her coat and even to put on a coat. Some of the kids just swing the coat around and all these kinds of things going wild and I say there’s one way to slip her arms through the coat. All these little things. Now, some people might say, “So what? What is the importance of having good manners?” Well, it does count eventually in your life. “Cause manners are international.

JUNGE: Aren’t manners a product of a bygone era?

TOLERTON: No, I don’t think so. If people think so, that is a shame because courtesy, there’s very little left. I don’t drive, but my husband, when he drives, very, very poor manners. I mean, like they just pull right in front of you in parking. So, you’re right, but it has to be preserved like anything else. If we let it go to hell, then that’s it.

JUNGE: You’re quoted as saying that manners never go out of style.

TOLERTON: Never. Good manners, never. I mean, poor, you can do that so often, crudeness. Refinement. I think we have to watch out also not to be that tough. I think refinement is also sensitivity to other things and to other people. To have feelings or soul. That is important in our lives, I think.

JUNGE: Mm-hmm. But aren’t women tied to this male/female relationship that maybe has changed?

TOLERTON: Yes, but then I guess that our movement of equality of women and men. Yes, I mean women still expect that a man should open the door and seat her and everything, but this has gone much away because women have become equal.

CONTINUATION-MARK JUNGE INTERVIEW OF ELIZABETH TOLERTON –

FEBRUARY 22, 1989

JUNGE: Elizabeth, I asked you, and I hope you don’t mind me repeating myself now that we’ve gotten ourselves organized, explain a little bit to me about this licensing by the National Academy of Licensing, what it is, what it’s supposed to do.

TOLERTON: Well, you see it works this way. In America, dance teachers do not have to have a license. Anyone can open up a dance studio. That is, if a person has taken some dance

classes and then they get some books, study, then they can open up their own school to teach in their basement or rent a hall. There is no control. In other professions—my husband is an attorney. He has to go to school to put a shingle out as a lawyer. And especially in Europe, it is mandatory that you have to have a license. You have to be a licensed teacher. So, even though you're a professional dancer, that does not give you an option or the right to open up your own school. Because you are a dancer, you are not a pedagogue. And as a teacher brings in so many more things, anatomy (unintelligible), and whatever you have to become a teacher because here as a dancer, you're way up there and you have to do all the difficult things, but you have to retrain yourself to go way back to train people from the beginning. You have to be actually educated, like any school teacher when they go to school and then they go to college, they have to learn how to teach students. And, especially, I feel coming from Europe that you handle little human beings bodies because you can injure them very, very easily if you're not sure what you're doing with them. So actually, it is sacrilegious if somebody says, "Okay, this is the jump. Just jump." They don't land correctly, they don't take off correctly, they can injure their knee, lower back, the ankle, name it, and so I have felt when I came over here that this is important for any dance teacher that they should be licensed, they should take an examination and be graded, and get a license because we are professionals, I think.

JUNGE: Have you always perceived yourself as an educator?

TOLERTON: Not always, because I danced all my life and then afterwards I had to become a teacher. Because you have to go back and be educated to break it down. That's the whole thing. You build a house, you don't build it from the top on down, you build it from a good foundation, and then you build and build. There are certain exercises that have to be done before another thing and another thing to build up to it. Not only for strength and all that, but like I said, to prevent injuries.

JUNGE: But you yourself as Elizabeth Tolerton, perceive yourself as a teacher.

TOLERTON: That's correct. I'm not performing when I'm performing in my class for my students. I do show them and I demonstrate what the end product should look like, so I still perform. I wouldn't do it in public, but I perform for my students. Students should see the complete thing when it is finished, what it should look like to work up to it, to have something to strive for.

JUNGE: Say I was a newcomer and was trying to learn how to dance. What would be the Elizabeth Tolerton instructions to me?

TOLERTON: It doesn't matter if you are an adult or a child. As far as a beginner, you're a beginner. You start with certain rigid exercises that have traditionally over years and years and years and years it has been that way. Naturally, we have added new things like anything else now, but we still go back to the old school like the Russian or the French or the Italian or the World Academy of London exercise. And the Academy of New York was the only place in that time that trained teachers in America. So there was a teacher program. If you wanted to become a dance teacher, they didn't care. The lady's name is (Dalia Mara?), and she still teaches and lectures and she writes many books on dance and she is a just a wonderful pedagogue. She was a dancer, but then really trained as a teacher. Now she trains people who want to become teachers that were dancers. So then, I went and I said that was interesting. I had never studied with anybody in America. So when I had my classes here, I read in *Dance* magazine, which is a national professional dance magazine for dancers and teachers, they have this summer a six weeks' course in New York. I think it sounds very, very good. It was just exactly the way I felt that people who want to go into the dance business should be trained to become teachers and have a diploma and pass an examination, written and also to demonstrate. They have to do both. They have to be able to demonstrate and also to write a written examination. So, what I did—Jess says to me, "My gosh! You know more than you can teach. You can't teach that much." And I said, "Well, it's just for my own feeling. I want to go and see what they are going to do because this is right down my alley. I agree with them. So, I went to New York. I was there six weeks and then took all the classes and everything and even ran into a friend of mine. She was Polish, and we danced together in Europe. (Madam Helena?) New York. And I walked in that day, the first day, there were only altogether sixty dance teachers in the whole United States that came for that course, and she was one of them. I looked at her and we hadn't seen each other for a long time. And she said, "Elizabeth," and I said, "Helena." So that's how we met after many years. Well, anyway, she was a very prominent dancer in Europe. Also, she took. And another friend of mine, she was the head of the Pasadena Playhouse in Pasadena at the College, Evelyn Limón (sp?). She was the head of the dance department at the college in

Pasadena, and she also came, so the people that came were the people that appreciated the program who were professionals. The little basement dance teachers did not because they could not even walk into the place; they didn't know what to do. So we had to take our examinations in front of a jury of very famous dancers and teachers in New York.. And you didn't know the people that you taught. They brought in students that I never had before and ordinarily anyone that has something on the ball, any profession, I mean you can look and you know. And so, they came in, even with physical defects like bow-legged, over extended, the other way, opposite from bow-legged.

JUNGE: Knock-kneed?

TOLERTON: Knock-kneed, that's the word. And so you have to explain the exercises you have to do are entirely different. And so, that was quite a revolutionary thing to do for (unintelligible.) Also, at that time in the summer in New York all the dancing schools were closed because it was so hot, so she was the only person at that time that had summer courses in New York. And now, you go to New York, everybody's teaching summer classes from the ballet theatre school on down to the New York City ballet where all the famous teachers (unintelligible) so they never did it., but now it's the thing to do.

JUNGE: But, this was something special (unintelligible)

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: And the quality is good.

TOLERTON: Oh, yes. She knew what she was looking for and that's the professional way of teaching and if you have the training and the background, you have no problem with it.

JUNGE: You said that there were sixty teachers, approximately, at that time around the country who were teaching dancing who really were professionals.

TOLERTON: Yes.

JUNGE: Were there many like you who had come from Europe?

TOLERTON: Well now, at that time—see, I was at the first course that she ever gave, so I just remember the one, like (Madam Helena?) from New York but like Evelyn Limón (sp?) came all the way from California and they came from different states.

JUNGE: But I guess I was saying, were there many people like yourself who came over from a war-torn Europe to open dance studios?

TOLERTON: I'm sure they did.

JUNGE: You have never run into anybody besides her?

TOLERTON: No. But I have read about people. There was one lady down in Colorado Springs who came from Austria, and she opened a school. She danced with the Vienna Opera. She was down in Colorado Springs.

JUNGE: Do you remember her name?

TOLERTON: Gerti, but I don't know her married name. I can't remember it. But she has a ballet school down there and also has a regular performing group.

JUNGE: Do you have any competition here in town?

TOLERTON: Well, I don't want to sound pompous or whatever. (Laughs)

JUNGE: Alright.

TOLERTON: But there's an entirely different atmosphere at my school. It's a professional school like I was taught in Europe. It isn't only the dance, but it's also the other that goes with it, manners, courtesy, decorum, refinement, and appreciation, whatever.

JUNGE: Are there any other people who teach dance on a regular basis?

TOLERTON: Oh, yeah. There always has been. When I first came here in '52 there were two different people. One rented the ballroom at the Elk's Club and then another one was at the little Playhouse over here called the Carriage House.

JUNGE: Next to the YWCA?

TOLERTON: That's right. And so there were two different people. They came once a week and gave lessons, so I heard of that and I never knew that there was anyone here at that time that taught dance and I just had a few children at my house. I just did that for my own enjoyment. I didn't charge for it. They were my neighborhood children. So when I heard that they were teaching, I was going to go introduce myself to one—well, a husband a wife that came down here from Casper—introduce myself and say I live here and would they mind if I watched one of their classes. So I did and it was unbelievable.

JUNGE: How would you describe it?

TOLERTON: Sacrilegious. Sacrilegious. And then I asked them how much they charged, and then I told them I think that I will open up a school here, and I just wanted to be sure that I didn't under charge them if I do teach. I would definitely charge more so they couldn't say I took their students away, and then I went to the other lady. She came up from

Greeley. She taught at the Playhouse and these other people taught at the Elk's Club. And the man played the saxophone for music for the students. It was just unbelievable. I mean the ballet. They made their own things up. (Chuckles) And also, though, you see I can't blame the teachers because in those days, now we're talking like '52, '53, you know, with television there wasn't much ballet. The biggest thing, the biggest impression in America to really see what ballet was like or what it was supposed to be, was the film "Red Shoes."

JUNGE: I remember that.

TOLERTON:: That introduced to individuals, the everyday American person who had never been to a live performance, who wasn't interested in ballet very much because they were not exposed to it. So that was the biggest success for ballet in America, that film. So, you see in those days, maybe Ed Sullivan maybe had some dancers on once in a while. So what if that lady said, "This is supposed to be a jete, (sp?)" and she made up her little thing, a little hop. Well, they didn't know the difference. I mean, how could they compare? So when I started, I said, "Oh, my God, I will never teach---and then the mommies sat in there and they made little dances up and then the mother said, "Now, Susie, that's the wrong foot." In my school, the mothers come only when they're invited. We have observation once in a while. Well, I would have said to the lady, "Well, if you want to teach your child, why don't you take her home and teach her instead of (unintelligible). But it was very, very poor. Very, very poor. It made me ill. So, that's when I really thought: "Is that what people pay for?" So, when I started, I did raise my price so they couldn't say that I took their students away.