

Evgenia Anastasakos
Energy in World Civ II
May 16, 2024

Oral History Interview with Julia Harris

This interview with my mother, Julia Harris, was conducted on May 16th, 2024 via phone call.

Evgenia Anastasakos: I'm going to be interviewing you on your memories of energy usage and how you've seen it change over the course of your life. This interview will be transcribed and added to an online collection hosted by the University of Chicago library. Do you consent to being recorded?

Julia Harris: Yes.

EA: Can you tell me about where you grew up?

JH: I was born in London. I lived in London for the first three years of my life and then moved out to the suburbs of London, to Surrey, where I lived for twelve years, no, nine years. Then, when I was about 12, we moved down to the southwest of England, in the lake part, to Dorset. And I lived there until I returned to London to go back to college when I was 18.

EA: Do you have any particular memories of kinds of energy usage? I'm using energy as a broad category here, including things like transportation. Whatever comes to mind when you think of energy.

JH: I don't really remember much about energy usage per se. But as a child, I do remember that we had electricity. But it was only like overhead lights, no plugs. The only plugs were in kitchens, for appliances. There were no, you know, there was not the array of plugs, which I'm assuming, cut down usage or there just weren't the appliances being used. That's something I do recall, there was a lot more battery operated stuff than electricity. So if you had a radio, you had a battery, you didn't plug it in, if that makes sense. And over time, obviously at some point, we started plugging things in. But I don't really remember when. I'm old enough to remember steam trains, but they weren't the major form of transportation. We were using diesel trains for the most part, and then, and feel free to check the actual date, sometime in — I'm gonna say the 70s — sometime, electric trains. They were fast trains, called one two fives. They went 125 miles an hour. So there was a significant change in transportation with regards to trains. And I think there must have been with buses, too. But again, these things happen over time. Old buses looked very different. than new buses, and London used to smell terrible. Except I kind of liked the smell because it reminded me of home, but with obviously a lot of fumes. With cars, there were no electric cars except disabled cars. Oh, actually, no, as a child, the milk van was an electric car. So your milk was delivered by an electric van. They were always electric. But later, there were no milk deliveries and there were no real electric cars as far as I remember. Just, as I say, disabled vehicles. Plenty of trains and buses. And then around the 70s, there was a huge impact in energy. There was a big coal miners strike.

EA: I was planning on asking you about that, actually. What do you remember from the miner's strikes?

JH: I believed it was the government of Edward Heath, it was either Heath or Thatcher, but I think it was before Thatcher, so Heath. The miners were on strike. So were the railway workers. And again, feel free to check the facts because it's a bit blurry. But there were multiple groups on strike, although it was fundamentally the coal miners. But I think the steel workers and stuff were out in sympathy. And anyway, coal miners, for sure. And public transport workers, I think, anyway, check the facts. But because there was a coal miner strike, there was not enough fossil fuel for all the other uses of fossil fuel. The government imposed a three day week on everybody. Except hospitals, I think. I can't remember about schools. I'm assuming not because I would remember that. You could only have electricity till like 10 o'clock at night. And it was three days a week. And I really can't remember not having electricity the other four days because I was still living at home and I wasn't cooking and doing my own laundry and this and that. Grandma might be good to answer those questions. But the reality of living through the three day week... I'm trying to think of where I was. I must have been at school, which was why perhaps it didn't affect me as much as it would have done if I had been working. Yeah, but I do remember, you know, like in the evening, you couldn't watch TV and you couldn't do stuff. But then again, I was a kid. So we were out playing a lot. I don't even know when it was, maybe I wasn't as young as I think I was. I think I was probably 15. Anyway, you'll have to check. But there were significant implications. I mean, there was chaos. And the Conservative government was ousted after that. The people were not happy with it. But it was as a result of the coal miners' strike.

I moved to America when I was in my 30s, early 30s. So by then, it's hard to say what happened in England. I guess I was going back regularly. But there's been the same transition there as there has been here now. Solar, I mean, even in the UK where there's not that much sun, Uncle Henry, for example, was one of the first people to get solar energy. And people were saying, "Oh, it's crazy. Why are you doing it. There's no sun." But he said, let me prove to everyone that actually it was worthwhile doing even in Northern Europe. Basically, where the weather is not like it is here in California, for example.

What else? So there's around, Grandma's, as you can see, we've got Fairlight.¹ You see the windmills there? So all these things have happened over time. Datewise, I don't know. But, again, you could just look that up. here. It's different. I mean, clearly the difference. When we first moved to America, we were living on the East Coast.² There's a significant difference, even from the East Coast to the West Coast. There were a lot more trams on the east coast. And then West Coast, there is—well, I'm a lot more aware of — a lot more solar. But then again, that might also be because that's when we lived here when solar energy came in.

EA: I had actually been wondering about comparisons between the US and the UK. You often talk about differences like car sizes. Are there any other things that you've noticed?

JH: There are very big differences from here in America to the UK, or in Europe in general, because in Greece, too, you see it. There are many more small cars in Europe that are way more fuel efficient. So smaller cars, their emissions are lower, like they are here in California, probably. California has obviously stricter rules on emissions coming out of the exhaust pipes, you know, from the engine and stuff. So [in

¹ Fairlight is a village in East Sussex, England. There are walking paths through the hills, where you can see wind farms in the distance.

² When my parents first moved to the U.S. they lived in Boston.

Europe there are] smaller cars and infinitely better public transport. Almost everywhere you live in the UK, you can get public transport. You can get trains, buses. I mean, here in America, unless you live in a major city, where public transport is good, like Chicago, or Boston or New York or even downtown San Francisco. But if you live outside in the suburbs, it's terrible. In England, it's not. Buses, trains, they go everywhere. Way more people travel on them, as you've experienced as well, when you've been there. A lot less people driving cars. Of course, there are more people now, so there are more cars, but proportionally to the US, way more car usage here. I always remember when we first moved there, we had a bus at the end of our road that took us to the train station in Palo Alto to get a train. The bus we could get would arrive five minutes after the train left. We're not talking "Okay, it can be a bit too late because of traffic." The bus would arrive five minutes after the train left. There was no thought to it whatsoever, whereas in Europe, bus timetables, train timetables, coach timetables are somewhat interrelated. You get the train and there'll be a bus waiting, wherever you are. So I think, again, that has implications for fuel and stuff because more people are going to use it if it's efficient.

Obviously, England is a very much smaller country. America is massive, which is one of the reasons why transportation is not as good. I'm not making excuses now, but it's kind of obvious that to have that network, that you have in the UK, which is a very small country, certainly in terms of landmass. You just have way much way more options for traveling and stuff.. And what other things have I been aware of? Airline travel, as always. Now, you know, there are way more, a lot more flights than there used to be. Well, actually, even at the airports, the trains are now electric. It used to be that you were taken from terminal to terminal by a bus. Now you go on an electric train between terminals. Small things like that, that you're not really aware of.

There's little or no air conditioning in the UK. Greece doesn't have it either. And we're now saying Greece because, you know, Babba, is from Greece.³ So we've spent a lot of time in Greece. Even in your lifetime of going to Greece, there was no air conditioning when we first went when you were little. So air conditioning in Greece in people's homes, like YiaYia's, has happened in the last 15 years. There was air conditioning, but it was too expensive and, for the most part, unnecessary because it was only really, really hot a few weeks of the year when a lot of people that would live in Athens are out living on an island somewhere in a family place. But even sorry, switching between even here in America, we still don't have air conditioning here in California. And whilst it's not directly relevant to energy use it somewhat is because we live in a house called a California Ranch and the way these houses were built, they're built with overhangs. They stay cooler than houses that are built now. It's absolutely essential now that you have to have air conditioning in a building. So yeah, you can say it's hotter, and it's to do with climate change and stuff. But there's also a second side to that: buildings are not built to be as energy efficient anymore and I think there's now a big trend to go into more energy efficient homes again, but for a while, it was "oh, we'll just stick air conditioning in and we don't care what we build it from." So this house, which is, you know, a modest four bedroom California ranch stays actually pretty damn cool without air conditioning. And I mean, we, when I say we have no air conditioning, we have it in a single room. And I only recall putting the air conditioning on four or five times. And, one period, when it was super hot and we basically all slept in the sitting room because it was too hot. But other than that, you open all the windows, you have ceiling fans, even in California, because as I say, the way the house was built helps with the heat.

³ My father is from Athens.

EA: Have you noticed changes in food production and consumption?

JH: When I was little, so we're talking the 60s, it seemed to me that there was a lot of processed food around. However, my mother was very much into cooking her own food and stuff. There was a great advertising campaign for the convenience of television meals and dinners, but it didn't really have anything, it was just sort of pushed towards you as "you get to have more free time" and this and that. So there was an influx of canned goods, I guess it was postwar, but I didn't get the same experience of maybe some of my friends who had basically everything come out of a can. And I think there's still that here/ Now you go and there's a lot of processed, a lot of canned and frozen foods. But there's also a swing again, and maybe it's because we live in California or because of the people we're friendly with, towards fresh foods and farmers markets. And again, I'm not sure if it's everywhere or it's just us. But there seems to be a turn back towards eating more healthily again. But there was a period where people were hugely into the pre-packed meals and everything was for convenience.

And now this is off topic, but going back to my absolute childhood. No one had a washing machine. I don't recall when we got our first washing machine. I do remember laundry being done by hand. I can remember a mangle, like you turned the handle and stuck the laundry through that to drain out. There was no spin dryer. There were these pulley things in the kitchen that were like a dryer. You would it wind up into the ceiling of the kitchen and the laundry would dry up there, or you had it in your garage if you had a garage. We did have a garage, so we had one in the garage. And I don't know if you were aware of it, but Uncle Robert used to have one in Twyford.

So now going back to the energy thing, people have washers and dryers even in England now. You have a tumble dryer. That's all relatively recent. As I say, I do not recall when grandma got a washing machine. I don't remember her having one maybe up until I was a teenager. I don't remember. Absolutely don't. I mean that's awful, because I wasn't doing my own laundry, right? So you don't really know how they're doing it. And I remember my grandparents never had a washing machine. Never. And one of your great aunts even had—I remember when she had her house remodeled and they brought in the toilet from the end of the garden. They built a wing where they had a bathroom and they built a kitchen and they put in a refrigerator and she refused to use the refrigerator. Thought it was a gimmick and that it was unnecessary. She still used the cold rooms, like a larder that's cold on the cold side of the house. She refused to use the refrigerator, she thought it was a waste of electricity. And that's in my lifetime. And I was I'm gonna say, I was 10 or 11 when she had that kitchen remodeled and until then she had no refrigerator. Just had a cold pantry. And you shopped every day because you didn't have refrigerators and freezers. Which again, is it energy efficient? Or is it just that you do it differently? People in Europe shop more frequently and they have much smaller refrigerators which use a lot less electricity, because there's no need to have half the things we have in the fridge all the time.

One of the differences between England and or Europe and America. Everything's way much bigger. And another thing culturally: much fewer appliances in Europe. Generally, people typically only have one television and we still only have one television here in America..

We have minimal appliances. We only have one fridge, for example. I know many of our neighbors have got fridges or freezers in the garage, as well as one in the kitchen. But in Europe, minimal appliances. It's changing a bit, but not really. You've seen enough of England and Greece to know that it's just different. It's just a different way of being.

EA: How have you seen the way people talk about the environment change?

JH: There's way more awareness. Again, though, I would say that when I was young, there was a huge awareness of the environment. Like your great-grandfather, so my grandfather, was hugely into composting. Nothing got wasted, seriously, because there was again, fewer processed foods, fewer cans, fewer boxes. He was very waste-minimal. He was a country person. You know, from London, but lived in the country. Highly aware of his environment, his general country-living-garden-area and the way they lived. They were amazing at doing that. Then came this huge amount of waste and plastic and boxes and more plastic and more plastic on top of more plastic and everything was plastic.

And now, I would say, I'm beginning to see again, people are becoming way more aware of where we live and the environment we live in. Huge awareness again of just what's being wasted. What can we reuse? What can we upcycle? But that was happening when you were little, again, going back years and years. Everyone wore everyone else's. hand-me-downs. You wore their hand-me-downs. I mean, it was just common. My cousins gave me clothes because they were very expensive. We weren't poor, we could afford them, but they were just ridiculously expensive. Grandma used to make my clothes, she would knit me sweaters. Now, you get your cans and your boxes, and then you're getting a lot of cheaper stuff from China and this and that. And then there is more waste. It happened gradually, but it seemed to speed up exponentially and then it got crazy.

And even now, and I'm noticing today, say you put five orders in Amazon, you'd get five boxes. Today, we got an Amazon order. And there were four items in the same box. And I'm not saying Amazon is good, by any means. They're still terrible at that. But I think what I'm trying to say is that there's an awareness again to try and reduce. Costco—I was there yesterday—stuff is not in those plastic containers anymore, it's in cardboard containers that will be compostable. So apples, for example, used to come in plastic. I didn't buy apples because they came in those plastic trays. Now they're in cardboard trays. I

Trader Joe's, for example, where we shop quite frequently, has a lot more cardboard containers and a lot less plastic. I mean, for example, charging people for shopping bags seemed rather trivial at the time, but it's had a huge impact on people buying reusable bags. Most people I know take the same bag, to and from. All this has happened in the last four or five years. Paper straws are now pretty much everywhere. Today, I had a drink out in Los Gatos, which is a kind of fancy area near where we live. And the straws were of a compostable material, they were not plastic, they were like a papery sort of thing. I'm also noticing even with take-out boxes now. They're not plastic. There's a bigger awareness, I think.

But then, on the flip side of that, there's a whole load of people who are now saying that climate change isn't real. In my opinion, crazies. I don't even know how to voice it. Common sense tells you the climate is changing. You know we see it living in California—the fires. We've had an unusually wet year, four years of drought and then wet. Unusual weather patterns, right?

You see a lot more solar and wind and that has had some impact on the environment. Positive and negative potentially. I hope that it's positive.

Again, I think there needs to be some sort of common sense. Because even with electric cars, I'm generally pro electric cars but I'm also acutely aware of lithium batteries and that side of it. It's not exactly without waste, right? And you look at when they went through this phase of saying "clean coal." Well, coal is not clean and if you look at how they clean it and what's left afterwards...

Maybe we need all of it, but less of it.

EA: Do you have any thoughts about where things are going?

JH: I'd like to see more renewable forms of energy, but also, as I say, renewable sources of energy that also in their own way don't damage the environment because it seems that all sources of energy in some way, like even solar panels, do that. And I don't know how you do it, by the way, but it could be renewable energy that's truly renewable. I think we need to look to truly renewable forms of energy. I don't know how, but if I did I would be very wealthy.

Themes:

- The differences between the US and Europe
- What conclusions emerge from the interview and how do they illuminate or challenge themes from the course?
- Methodology paragraph after intro: describing and reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of the oral history method, and the dynamics between you and the interviewee

Methodology:

The interview was conducted in the afternoon, on May 16th, while I was in Chicago and my mother, Julia Harris, was in San Jose, California. We spoke over the phone, while I took notes. Many of the stories that my mother shared were ones that I was already familiar with. We had discussed the miners' strikes, her memories of her grandfather's house, and other topics before. I wrote interview questions with these past conversations in mind. (dynamics)

Themes;

- The miner's strike and energy scarcity
- Energy intensive households
- Household energy use being constrained by energy scarcity
- Local household environments influencing the way that energy is used

More Work For Mother: Ruth Schwartz Cowan

Chapter: "Twentieth-Century Changes in Household Technology"

- 70: "Conventional wisdom has been telling us—for many decades now—that twentieth-century technology has radically transformed the American household, bu