

INTERVIEW WITH

Helen S. King

by

David Horrocks
Oral Historian

on

May 12, 1975

for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE
DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interview of
Helen King.

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44,
United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions
hereinafter set forth, I, Helen King (hereinafter referred
to as the donor), do hereby give, donate, and convey to the
United States of America all my rights, title, and interest
in the tape recording and transcript of a personal interview
conducted on May 12, 1975 and prepared for deposit in the
Dwight D. Eisenhower Library. This assignment is subject
to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be available for use by
researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the
Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

(2) The tape recording shall not be available for use
by researchers during the donor's lifetime. After the donor's
death, access to the tape recording is to be for background
use only, and researchers may not cite, paraphrase, or
quote therefrom.

(3) The donor retains during the donor's lifetime all



literary property rights in the material given to the United States by the terms of this instrument. Thereafter the aforesaid literary property rights will pass to the United States Government. During the life of the donor, researchers may publish brief "fair use" quotations from the transcript (but not the tape recording) without the donor's express consent in each case.

(4) Copies of the open portions of the interview transcript, but not the tape recording, may be provided by the library upon request to researchers.

(5) At the discretion of the Archivist of the United States, copies of the interview transcript, but not the tape recording, may be deposited in or loaned to other institutions. Upon death of donor, at the discretion of the Archivist of the United States, copies of the tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to other institutions.



Wileen S. King
Donor

July 14, 1977
Date

James B. Rhoads
Archivist of the United States

August 4, 1977
Date

This begins an interview with Mrs. Helen King in New York City.
This is David Horrocks of the Eisenhower Library. May 12, 1975

MR. HORROCKS: Now, Mrs. King, when did you first meet
General Eisenhower?

MRS. KING: Well, it was in April of 1948, I don't remember
the precise date, but he came there to the University at
that time because he wanted to, sort of get a feel of
the place and learn the job as it were while Dr. [Frank]
Packerthal, who was then the acting president, would still
be there and hopefully they might be helpful to each other.
And I had been in the University a long time in a secre-
tarial capacity, and they were looking for somebody that
could handle correspondence and maybe give some guidance,
chiefly with making appointments and that kind of thing; who
would know when someone called up and said, could he see the
president, it was someone that should see the president--
that is, someone from the university faculty and staff.
They had their own ways of taking care of people from the
outside. But, as I said a minute ago, I don't think they
particularly wanted to know how the university ran or whom
he should see. That is, the military aides with whom he was



surrounded were considerably distressed by anything that had to do with the university. If I set up an appointment even with the acting president at the acting president's request, nine times out of ten Colonel [Robert] Schulz would--as he said--"Kill it."

HORROCKS: Why?

KING: Because he didn't want the General to be bothered. He didn't want him to take the time. If it happened to be on a day when the General was suppose to play golf or do something else, well, nothing happened that day. He had to have every Wednesday afternoon free to play golf.

HORROCKS: My gosh! Why did they think the General came to Columbia?

KING. Well, I often wondered that myself. Actually, I was quite impressed with the General, with his vocabulary. I took a lot of his dictation, and he really had a tremendous vocabulary. I was surprised because I had somehow had the feeling that this was a military man, that the academic lingo



would be something he really wasn't acquainted with, but he had a very good command of the language. He didn't always dictate parsed sentences. One of my greatest difficulties was to make precise language out of what he had dictated. And one of his tricks would be to dictate to me for about an hour and then he would say, "Let me call Al Jacobs in now." Al Jacobs was then the provost who was actually running things on the academic side. And he would then say to me, "Now read that to Mr. Jacobs and see what he thinks and maybe get some suggestions." And, of course, I would try to read it so that it was grammatically correct, and that was very hard to do.

I enjoyed my contacts with him, little as they were. I answered the telephone and I had a very hard time with that because I didn't know who his cronies were and I didn't know who Colonel Schulz--he was then a major, I shouldn't call him colonel--who he'd say yes or no to.

HORROCKS: When you spoke with Eisenhower and he would seem so accessible, was he aware that his aides were cutting him off like this?



KING: No, oh, no. You hardly went into his office. He was completely isolated. It was really amazing. I don't think he ever came out into the room where I sat with Schulz. I was surrounded by three military aides, and I don't think the General came out there more than two or three times in the whole time I was there. He had a private entrance door; we didn't see him come in. But they had the place all rigged up with lights that lit and bells that rang and buzzers that buzzed according to where he was sitting and what door he was opening or closing. And then they drilled a hole in the door between our room and his so that they could see what he was doing without his knowing that they were doing this. And then they came and asked me to stand up and see if I could see. They had made the hole so high that unless I stood on tiptoe I couldn't see. I didn't really want to see what he was doing anyway. He had no real privacy there.

HORROCKS: Isn't it really his own fault?

KING: Oh, yes.

HORROCKS: Couldn't he have come out, really?



KING: Yes, he could have. But I think he was a little overwhelmed by what he had got himself into and like any man in a strange situation he thought maybe the best thing to do was just stay away. I should say that the Christmas after he came there, the following Christmas, I by that time had bowed out. I had had it up to here with the military and fortunately Mr. Jacobs was happy to have me with him and I went into his office. I'm not sure now whether I instigated the change or Schulz did. But Schulz made it convenient for me to instigate it. I think he hated me worse than I did him, because I had only the university at heart and he had only the army and these other things at heart. But anyway, I was asked by the then vice-president of the university to head up a committee to plan a Christmas party for the staff and their families. And I remember the General and Mrs. Eisenhower came, and her mother, and they were delightful at this party. And I had--at that time--I still have--but I had a nine-year-old daughter with long red pig-tails who was thrilled to death that she was invited to come to the party too. We were supposed to bring our families.



And he picked her out right away. He acted as Santa Claus and he said, "Will you be my helper?" And he had her up there helping him.

HORROCKS: This is General Eisenhower?

KING. Yes. He said, "Now you read off the names," because each person was supposed to get a little gift and there was a little jingle attached to each one and he read these things off and handed them out to everyone, and then we played silly games. Everybody had a famous name on his back like George Washington--I had Eisenhower's name on my back. You were supposed to guess who you were by asking questions of other people who could answer only yes or no. He entered into all of this. We also had a treasure hunt. He really was just charming and seemed to enjoy it all.

HORROCKS: Charming person.

KING: Really.

HORROCKS: Not active in the university at first.



KING: No, well I think that--

HORROCKS: At first.

KING: If times had been normal, he would have done all right and if he hadn't had so much protection. But he was constantly on call, you see, to Washington and to SHAPE and NATO. And he was sick. He'd had a heart attack that we didn't even know about. I think he was away in--

HORROCKS: Was it ileitis, some ailment--

KING: Some ailment. I know it was along in January we always prepared the letters that were to go out to people whom the trustees had nominated for honorary degrees. It was my chore to write all these confidential letters for the president's signature telling them that their names had been presented. Columbia never gives honorary degrees in absentia. The recipient must say he is free to come on the day and date to receive it.



HORROCKS: Collect on delivery.

KING: If you don't come, you don't get. So I had all the letters prepared for his signature and they went off to Georgia or wherever he was and they didn't come back and they didn't come back. Weeks went by and we got worried because there wasn't--

HORROCKS: You didn't even know he was--

KING: No. Finally the letters came back and they each one had a straight line drawn down through it like that and a little note from Schulz saying to have these letters prepared for the vice president's signature. He still didn't tell us why.

HORROCKS: Isn't that incredible?

KING: Well, he may have told somebody up here, but I didn't know why. So I had to have the letters all re-done--a difference of making maybe twelve, fifteen letters, but they're long letters and they're very precise and everything must be perfect,



you know. But we didn't know until long after that why they weren't signed. I suppose he could have signed them. Even there again, I imagine it was a case of protection. They didn't want to bother him to sign his name twelve or fifteen times, even though he probably could have done it.

HORROCKS: Now, you're talking about Robert Schulz, Kevin McCann?



KING: You see, there were so many aides there and they changed rapidly in the beginning. I think McCann was there right on through, but he didn't come in the very beginning. Now, I can't remember whether he was there at that early time or not.

HORROCKS: So you're really not speaking about him as--

KING: I'm not sure now. When the General first came there was a man named [Craig] Cannon.

HORROCKS: Right.

KING: And there were two or three others. One was Mac-something.

HORROCKS: Michaelis?

KING: That doesn't sound just right.

HORROCKS: Maybe not.

KING: They were awfully nice guys, but they were fish out of water. I mean if I had gone to Washington and tried to help run the United States government, I would have been much worse off than they were.

HORROCKS: They were with General Eisenhower and it was Eisenhower's idea to go to Columbia, not theirs.

KING: Precisely. And they were trying to do as best as they could with a difficult situation. I must confess that, except for Schulz, none of them wore a uniform. He did in the beginning, and I think this is what really irritated him the most. I told him that I thought he would be more popular around there if he would do as the others did. I



hadn't been used to being smacked down or told that I couldn't say what I wanted to say when I wanted to say it. He didn't take kindly to my saying this, but I noticed that he did quit wearing the uniform sometime after that.

HORROCKS: The General has written that when he went to Columbia he really wanted to meet the faculty and students and that he therefore moved the office of the president to the first floor below--

KING: Well, no actually the main floor below is the 200 floor. Yes, he did, he did. And I think he was sincere when he said that. But I think his contact with the students was limited largely to when he happened to be walking across the campus from office to home if he saw one, "Hi, how are you?" They have a yule log ceremony at Christmas time and different kinds of little functions where the president traditionally had been in the habit of making a few remarks, and I'm sure he did that. And there may have been occasions when they had the students up at the house. I don't seem to remember that. Dr. [Grayson] Kirk did a lot of that.



HORROCKS: The informal responsibilities of--

KING: --after he became president. I don't really remember General Eisenhower having very many meetings with either the faculty or the students for that matter. I know that faculty members came in and out of the office to see him from time to time and he did make some formal appearances and attended some university dinners.

HORROCKS: People were still a bit afraid to say to him, "Sir, your aides are cutting you off."



KING: Yes. I don't know whether anyone ever said that. Certainly I didn't. It wasn't for me to do it. But he may have eventually been aware of that. I don't know. He did change aides quite rapidly in the beginning and this may have been part of it. Maybe he thought he was feeling them out and they were feeling the other side of the house out to see how they got along. It's hard to know.

HORROCKS: What sort of things when he came to Columbia and wanted to learn from Dr. Jacobs--

KING: Jacobs and--

HORROCKS: Fackenthal.

KING: And Mr. Fackenthal who was the acting president. Mr. Jacobs was there as the provost. And then Dr. Jacobs left. I think he got fed up with the military too--I know he did. He went to be chancellor at the University of Denver. That was when Dr. Kirk became provost. But actually the mail was the thing that overwhelmed us all. We never were used to that much mail. We got hundreds--it seemed like thousands of letters a day.



HORROCKS: Oh, 1948 with the--

KING: And this seemed to be everybody that had ever had a husband or a son or a father or anybody in any branch of the armed service wanted to write to Mr. Eisenhower to ask for something--either to get their son into college or to law school or to medical school or to get a pension for somebody that had--I don't know--there were just zillions of things and some of the letters were written on tissue paper with what

looked like a burned match and some of them were really nice. But, we had to answer every single one according to Mr. Schulz. And then we got tons of mail from people urging him to run for the presidency. All of those we especially had to answer. They weren't overlooking any bets for whatever political campaign he did enter, although every letter said, "I have no political aspirations. Whatever attributes I possess will always be at the call of my country. And I'll do the best I can, blah, blah, blah, but I have no intention of running."



HORROCKS: I think they were being--

KING: Oh, they were being extra cautious, because no matter how dumb the letter was or from how ignorant or far-gone the person, he got an answer. It didn't get signed by the General. It would usually be signed by Mr. Schulz.

HORROCKS: Was it Schulz's decision that you would be so careful about answering all these--

KING: Well, this I don't honestly know. He would be the one that gave us the instructions to do it, but whether this was actually worth it all or not--I don't know.

HORROCKS: What sort of things did the General want to know from Dr. Jacobs and Mr. Fackenthal? What was he curious about when he first--

KING: Oh, well, of course, I didn't sit in on any of his conferences with them. I don't honestly know. He used to get some genuine appeals from people to make speeches here and there. He did consult with them as to whether they thought it was a good thing for him to do, whether it would be a good thing for the university for him to do certain things.

HORROCKS: Didn't Mr. Fackenthal think that the General did not take sufficient advantage of the advice and help he could have offered.

KING: I suppose he did, but I didn't discuss that with Mr. Fackenthal either. He was still up on the third floor in



what had originally been the president's office--Nicholas Murray Butler's office. He had a couple of ladies that had been with him as secretaries for many, many years and had also been with Dr. Butler, and it just so happened that they wanted to leave at that time. I imagine whether they had planned to or not they would have, because it was such a complete change, and they had all been there a long time. One of them was getting married and one of them was going to live in California. I don't know--there were very legitimate reasons why they left and I never did discuss with them what they thought of all of this. Of course, Mr. Fackenthal was still the acting president, but he was kind of in limbo and so too was the General in limbo because--



HORROCKS: This is the period before the formal inauguration.

KING: This is before the formal inauguration, between April and October. But Dr. Kirk was the chairman of the inauguration committee. I think he had a hard time to get in and ask the General anything. Maybe he told you so.

HORROCKS: Was the General at ease in the university?

KING: Well, he seemed to be. He seemed to be a very relaxed kind of person. He had a temper and I heard a certain amount of salty language from time to time, but I would say that he was. He certainly had this thing they now refer to as charisma. We didn't call it that then, but there were a lot of receptions given when he first came, of different kinds, and I can remember we'd all be in a big room and he wouldn't have arrived yet, and somehow the minute he walked in even though you wouldn't see him you would know he was there. There was some presence all of a sudden.

HORROCKS: Now, this isolation you're talking about, especially that Robert Schulz imposed, this is before the inauguration especially.

KING: Right. Well, the only experience I had was before the inauguration, because after that I was in another area, although this was a criticism which I continued to hear as long as he was there. But I couldn't vouch for it from my personal experience. But the chief thing was there were so



many times when he just wasn't there. They didn't have to protect him because he wasn't there. I mean these were times when he might have been in Washington; he might have been in Europe; he might have been in Georgia. We knew mostly when and where he was and why. He had perfectly legitimate reasons for having to go because he was at the call of his country as he said. And the President would call on him to do this or to go there or to do something and he would go. The army came first.

HORROCKS: Before he came to Columbia and after the announcement had been made that he would be coming, were you all looking forward with enthusiasm to it?

KING: I don't know whether it was enthusiasm. I think it was a certain degree of excitement and wonderment. And when I was told that I was to be his secretary--bells rang. I remember my little daughter was so excited. I said, "Do you know who General Eisenhower is?" And she did. I didn't realize how aware a nine-year-old would be. I think everybody on the campus was excited about it and looked forward to it, but with a certain amount of apprehension. Academic



people are not easily convinced of anything, if you've had much experience with them. I mean, they're pretty deep thinkers as a rule and slow to be taken in and they were all pretty much aware of what might happen, I think.

HORROCKS: When he finally left Columbia, was there a feeling that it had not been a worthwhile experience for the university?

KING: Oh, I don't think anybody ever felt that it really hadn't been a worthwhile experience. He wasn't there very long and, of course, during the last two years that he was president in title, Dr. Kirk was actually the acting head of the university and running things. Oh, I think there were, especially among the trustees and some of the top people, there was probably always a great deal of satisfaction in thinking that Columbia had provided the United States of America with a President. And I always had the feeling that this is what the whole intent was in bringing him there in the first place on the part of some of the trustees and on the part certainly after he got there of these aides. I think they thought this was going to be the greatest thing in



the world. They were just going to get themselves into the White House too.

HORROCKS: So you think that the aides certainly were looking for--

KING: Well, I had the feeling that they were. The fact that we answered all these letters that came in urging him to run gave me that feeling because there were hundreds and hundreds of letters and some of them were--

HORROCKS: Why do you feel that some of the trustees had in mind the political angle of making him president.

KING: Oh, it's just a personal hunch. They were important men themselves in high positions in business and industry, and I just think they thought that would be a fine thing to do. It's not unusual, is it?

HORROCKS: No, no it's--

KING: It seems to me that most any big corporation might have that feeling that they would like to send their man to Washington.



HORROCKS: Yes, pretty reasonable.

KING: Yes.

HORROCKS: Now, when you were his secretary what exactly were your duties then?

KING: Well, as I said, largely to open and answer mail. I drafted letters chiefly for either Schulz's or his signature, drafted routine types of letters, and took a good deal of his dictation and some of the things that he--

HORROCKS: His dictation then and things like that, were those mostly cleaning up business with the army or--

KING: No, no he had an army girl there who did all the army things.

HORROCKS: And her name was?

KING: I wish I could tell you. I can't remember. She was still in the army. She was--what do you call, yeoman, or what do they call the gals that do that kind of thing? She had army status.



HORROCKS: Was she there the whole time?

KING: No. Oddly enough she wanted very much to be there and she had her eye on my job and I was too naive to see this in the beginning. And as a matter of fact, I think that was part of what made it so easy for me to ease myself out because they were so anxious to bring her in. But pathetically for her she could not take a job at Columbia, or anywhere, because you can't leave the army until you pass a physical exam, and when she went for this physical exam it was found that she had tuberculosis and they sent her off to Arizona or someplace. And by the time she was well, they had replaced her.

HORROCKS: But originally there was a separate secretary--

KING: There was a separate secretary--

HORROCKS: --for the military affairs.

KING: --to handle all the military.

HORROCKS: Was it the General himself who had in mind, or



Colonel Schulz, her being sole personal secretary to the General?

KING: Oh, I don't think they ever had in mind to have any one person to be the sole personal secretary. They had asked me to come because I had a long background of university experience and they naturally needed somebody with the army experience too. And she was brought along from Washington.

HORROCKS: What sort of university affairs did the General pick up on as far as your contact?

KING: Well, you see, he was not officially the president then and I've sort of forgotten. It was largely a social business then because every organization, every group, everybody in the whole university wanted to have a little piece of his time somewhere and to entertain him in some way, and he was very generous and gracious about trying to go to all these things.

HORROCKS: Is there anything that you recall that happened



during this period of contact with the General that stands out as particularly significant as far as a clue to the man, why he came to Columbia?

KING: No. You see, so much of my thinking has been colored by what I read and what was said as to why he wanted to come. I honestly don't know. I think he was probably convinced by a lot of people that this was a great thing for him to do. I think he was sincerely interested in young people of college age, and I think he did feel that he might make a contribution in that way.

HORROCKS: Was he particularly full of enthusiasm, when he came in for the job, or trepidation?

KING: Oh, when he felt good he was always very robust acting and, yes, seemed to have enthusiasm for anything that he undertook to do. He was not inclined, you know, to sit around and look gloomy. They always talked about that famous Eisenhower smile, but he wasn't really an easy smiler. I don't recall that he had that big grin on a great deal of the



time, but then you don't go around grinning when you have business to attend to.

HORROCKS: No one wants to talk about the Eisenhower frown.

KING: Well, I don't mean that he frowned either. But I mean he wasn't any more of a grinner than anybody else. He did have a charming grin, no doubt about it, and when he used it, it was most effective, but he was not the kind of a person to be constantly grinning and smiling. He was a serious person.

HORROCKS: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked or a topic that I haven't explored that you think would be of benefit to historians on this topic.

KING: Oh, I don't think anything that I've said is going to be of any great benefit; it's for what it's worth. He tried-- he really did try very hard. As I say, he had so many people appealing to him. Some of these people had appealed to him to help get their sons into school, the college or medical school or whatever.

HORROCKS: Did he help them, or did he give them a form letter?



KING: No, this is where he got guidance from other people, you see. No president in any university will say to the admissions officer in a certain school, "Here's a man, I think he's great, you take him." They don't ever do that, at least none that I've worked for. But they will try to help if they know the boy, if they know his parents--they've got his record, everybody has that; the school has it and everybody knows what he's done in the past, where he went to school. And all they can do if they want to help the boy is to say, "I think he's a fine boy, I know his parents, and this and this and this." I remember Eisenhower did have a very good phrase he used at the end of each such letter. And his wife had friends who would try to work through her to get him to help their sons get in, and she would not do anything either except to turn it over to him and then he would have to write a little different letter than he would for somebody he never heard of. But if it was a boy whose parents he knew, and maybe he had even met the boy himself, he would say so, but then he would always end up by saying, "The admission officer's decision must be final." He never asked an admissions officer as far as I know to--



HORROCKS: How did Mamie fit in to the university?

KING: Oh, she was charming and delightful. And I used to have some telephonic communication with her from time to time and she came to a lot of social things. But she didn't do a lot of the traditional type of entertaining that the president's wife (Mrs. Butler) had been known to do in the past. She didn't particularly like New York. She never said so to me, but somebody told me she had respiratory problems and the New York climate didn't agree with her. It was too humid. I don't think faculty life was her type exactly. She was charming and gracious, a lovely person and her mother, too, when she did go to these functions, but she didn't try to initiate very many of them I'm afraid.

HORROCKS: Well, can you think of anything that I--I guess I just asked that, didn't I?

KING: Well, they entertained and they had their first grandchild I think when they were there. Their son was teaching at West Point.



HORROCKS: Right, David.

KING: And after David was born, I remember they were casting around for a crib. Mrs. Eisenhower thought she would like to have a secondhand crib there in the house so that if the children came the baby would have a place to sleep. So I volunteered my crib because my daughter had long since outgrown it. But then she decided she wanted to buy a new one. So my crib didn't go to 60 Morningside Drive.

HORROCKS: That would have been nice.

KING: But they got a great deal of joy from that, having this grandchild and having their son so nearby. And they got to see him and his wife from time to time.

HORROCKS: Did they take advantage of many social events in New York, the cultural events that--

KING: You mean the young people, the young--

HORROCKS: I'm sorry the--



KING: Oh, the Eisenhowers themselves.

HORROCKS: Mr. and Mrs. Eisenhower.

KING: Oh, I'm sure they did. I imagine they did although, off the top of my head, I don't seem to remember, but I'm sure they went to dinners and theaters and concerts and things like that. They received many invitations.

HORROCKS: Well, I thank you very much. I realize that this has been really short notice.

KING: I haven't thought about this very much in the last few years I'm afraid, but anyway it's nice to meet you.

HORROCKS: Thank you very much.

