

ORAL HISTORY

RUTH CHURCH GUPTA

(1917-2009)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The oral history of Ruth Church Gupta is one of four oral histories conducted by the former California State Bar Committee on History of Law in California in 1987. These were the final oral histories conducted by the committee, and they are published for the first time in the present volume of *California Legal History* (vol. 6, 2011). The interview was conducted on September 28, 1987, by committee member Rosalyn Zakheim on behalf of the committee (which she chaired in 1988-89) and the Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles (of which she was president in 1983-84).

The oral history has been reedited for publication. The spelling of names has been corrected wherever possible, and explanatory notations in [square brackets] have been added by the editor. The sound recording and original transcription are available at The Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. The oral history is published by permission of the State Bar of California.

Gupta served as president of the Queen's Bench Bar Association in San Francisco in 1953, and Ruth Rymer, who served as president in 1976, agreed to prepare the brief reminiscence of Gupta that appears below.

— SELMA MOIDEL SMITH

RUTH CHURCH GUPTA

RUTH RYMER*

I was admitted to practice in 1971. Everything in law school had been part of a male-oriented paradigm and at first glance the Bar appeared similar. Suddenly, when I joined Queens Bench, I was surrounded by sympathetic sisters-in-the-law and aunts-in-the-law. One of my new aunts was Ruth Church Gupta who had been admitted the year before I graduated from high school. We developed an immediate rapport when we discovered that we had both attended Mills College.

Ruth and her husband, Kamini, had a general practice in the Marina District in San Francisco where they served their clients through decades, if not generations. In one case, Ruth represented a widow who was a life tenant in a condominium. The remaindermen incessantly harassed her to release her interest. Ruth not only restrained the bad guys but obtained damages for the client's psychological trauma.

In the early 1970s, the California Legislature was host to a multitude of new bills which demanded a major change in the way women were treated by the law. Both Ruth and I frequently appeared before its committees to represent organizations in support of this proposed legislation. Chief among the bills was the Equal Rights Amendment. Our opponents insisted that equal rights would prohibit gender-separate toilets. Ruth convinced the Legislature that the concept of privacy would prevent that disaster.

A major women's focus was to eliminate the husband's management and control of community property and his right to "designate any reasonable place and mode of living, and the wife must conform thereto." Until no-fault divorce this statute had often been used by the errant husband who abandoned his wife, demanded she join him in a place where he knew she would not, and then petitioned for divorce on the grounds of desertion. We thought that even after no-fault, the statute should go. It did, partly through Ruth's efforts.

*Ruth Rymer (formerly Miller), JD, PhD, served as chair of the Family Law Advisory Commission to the Board of Legal Specialization, State Bar of California, (1977–1982), and is the author of the historical novel, *Susannah, A Lawyer* (2009).

The male legislators were astonished that there could be such a thing as a woman lawyer, or that she could make logical arguments. Ruth was particularly effective as a lobbyist for women. On one occasion, a legislator asked Ruth an irrelevant question and she, a good actress, replied, “Well, Your Honor . . .” She pretended to be flustered, but Ruth had so charmed him that he voted for our bill.

Ruth was a wonderful mentor to me. It was my privilege to have known her.

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*Oral History of***RUTH CHURCH GUPTA****(1917 – 2009)**

Q: Thank you very much for allowing us to interview you. We really appreciate it.

GUPTA: I'm certainly glad to be a part of history.

Q: I'd like to start asking you something about your childhood and your background. I think you were born in California, weren't you?

GUPTA: Yes, I'm one of those strange persons that was born in California. So were both my parents in the 1880s, and both my grandfathers in the 1850s.

Q: What part of the state did you grow up in?

GUPTA: I grew up in Northern California. I was born in Orland. Went to school in Yuba City. Then I went to college at Mills College.

Q: Were either of your parents attorneys?

GUPTA: Neither of my parents were attorneys. In fact, neither of them had a college education.

Q: How then were you inspired to go into law?

GUPTA: I had no intention whatever of going into law when I was in college. I was inspired to go to college by my parents who insisted that I have

an education. And I went into the business world out of college. When I married my husband, he was a law student at Hastings. He was drafted and went off into the Army. I was working for a lady who was an attorney in the business world. She inspired me. One day I marched into her office and said, "I quit. I'm going to law school," because I saw there was no future for me in that particular business world and decided to go to law school, just out of the blue.

Q: You said you went to Mills College. That's a women's college, isn't it?

GUPTA: That's correct.

Q: Did you receive any special encouragement for yourself, either in the business world or towards the professions at Mills?

GUPTA: Yes. I give Mills a great deal of credit for inspiring me to do whatever I wanted to do. Many of our class, although we graduated in 1938, which was before the women's revolution, were all encouraged to use our talents to the greatest of our ability. We had a really marvelous inspiration there.

Q: What was your major in college?

GUPTA: I had a double major of math and economics.

Q: Do you think that helped you at all, later on?

GUPTA: I think math is a marvelous preparation for law, because you learn logic and reasoning, the solution of problems, and it's quite similar to the law in many ways.

Q: Have you kept in touch with any of your classmates from Mills or from high school?

GUPTA: I kept in touch with Mills classmates. In fact, we have our fiftieth reunion coming up, and I'm the one who is supposed to be raising the money and organizing it. My college roommate and I have kept in very close touch, although she lives in Washington, D.C.

Q: What did your mother and father think when you decided you wanted to go to law school?

GUPTA: They were very pleased and very proud. When my husband came home from the Army I caught up with him, and we did the last two years

of law school together and graduated together. And when his mother and my parents were at the graduation, they were bursting with pride.

Q: If it isn't too personal, how did you meet your husband?

GUPTA: At a political meeting. We both were active in politics and involved in the Young Democrats.

Q: Once you graduated from law school, did you immediately begin your practice together?

GUPTA: We opened our office right here, where we still are. I continued to work for a few years and spent only part time in the office. My husband was keeping the office going. But we've been here at this same address since January 1949.

Q: For the record, that's 2237 Chestnut Street in San Francisco. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

GUPTA: I had two brothers, both of whom died in their twenties.

Q: Did your mother work outside the home?

GUPTA: Yes, she was a pioneer woman. In fact, she grew up in Mariposa and came down to San Francisco, went to secretarial school, got herself a job up in Quincy in the country, and that's where she met my father. She was very independent, in 1910 or so.

Q: I think we're finding in these interviews that lots of the women had very independent mothers. When you were in school — in grammar school and high school — did you have favorite subjects and things that you thought were especially interesting to you?

GUPTA: I was generally an A student, valedictorian in high school. I enjoyed Latin, Spanish, geography — everything, I think, was special. I wasn't an officer in any of the student organizations in high school. It was during the Depression and I spent some of my time working, as I did all through college.

Q: What kind of jobs did you have?

GUPTA: Anything I could get — babysitting, hashing, whatever.

Q: What years did you go to law school, and what was it like at that time?