Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ellen Hurwitz, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Julia Greider, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014
Abstract

Ellen Hurwitz places a lot of emphasis on her academic experiences in this interview. She begins by telling a story about being reprimanded for knitting in class. She goes on to discuss the dating culture and how people reacted to her Judaism. She also talks about what it was like to study Russian in the Cold War era, as well as what it meant to be a woman in the 1960s. She emphasizes the importance of being open to hearing various points of view so that they can be dealt with in the wider world, and she expresses thankfulness that Smith exposed her to so many different viewpoints and subjects. She concludes by discussing what it feels like to come back for the first reunion she has attended.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kristofer Jensen, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording


Transcript

GREIDER: This is Julia Greider, and I’m conducting an interview Ellen Stiskin Hurwitz, class of 1964, on May 16th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

HURWITZ: You’re welcome.

GREIDER: So to start out, just tell me how you ended up coming to Smith.

HURWITZ: Oh goodness. (laughter) Now you’re asking me to think about 55 years ago. And I guess I would say that I wanted to go to a college that was going to challenge my brain. And at the time, Smith was right up there as one of the top schools. And one of my best friends from childhood was considering coming here as well. And between the two of us, we had very enjoyable interviews, and experiences, pre-collegiate experiences. We had known some alumnae of distinction, and we thought, Let’s go. And so we did.

GREIDER: Did the fact that Smith was a women’s college influence your decision at all?

HURWITZ: It certainly did. I thought, at that time in my life, at that point in history, it was a very, very important thing be — to go a place where I was going to be unequivocally encouraged, and not deal with all those complicated issues of competing with men in the classroom. I’d done enough of that in high school, and seen the unfortunate tendency for teachers to be more favorably disposed to the men who would challenge authority and challenge — and I always did. So I wanted the space to become myself.

GREIDER: So what house did you live in?

HURWITZ: I lived for three years in Cushing, and then for a fourth year in Lamont.

GREIDER: OK. So want to talk a little bit about your house communities, and how that affected your time here?
HURWITZ: To be perfectly candid, the impact of my house community was relatively negligible. I had one or two wonderful friends in Cushing House, and I did see them both on campus and off campus, and somewhat after graduation. But my experience was far more centered on the academic life than it was on the dormitory life. I found a lot of it silly, and I really didn’t feel all that comfortable with most of the dorm activities. I’m not proud of that, but that’s the way it was when I was at Smith.

GREIDER: So tell me a story about an academic experience that had a big influence on you.

HURWITZ: So many. So very many. I was very much taken with the quality of the faculty and the expectations that they set. Almost across the curriculum. And I enjoyed everything from sitting back, taking notes, and hearing great lectures. I mean, and there were some great teachers. I remember particularly right now, thinking about Elizabeth Drew, and listening to her attitudes, and her perspectives on literature. But, you know, I ended up studying history and language, and I enjoyed many of the lectures and the interaction with my teachers of history, and of language. I guess I would say across the curriculum, there were always interesting people, both among the students and within the faculty, and the opportunity for learning is what stayed with me. So a particular story? You know, there are so many silly ones, and there are some that I don’t — they’re good, but they’re silly.

GREIDER: That’s OK. (laughs)

HURWITZ: And I’ll tell it to you, but that might inhibit some future things. I had one teacher tell me that I shouldn’t knit in the classroom because knitting was a form of intellectual masturbation. And I simply decided — she asked me to go to the back of the class if I was going to knit. So I went to the back of the class, and I said some — I made some smartass remark to her in response, but I went to the back of the class. And I realized — it was a real important lesson for me, because I realized it was offensive. It’s kind of like people using a cell phone in the classroom. It’s very distracting, and it’s disrespectful. But at the time, I didn’t quite get it. But about a year later, it dawned on me that she was right, and maybe she didn’t say in as polite a way and as — and it made me rebel rather than concede, but after a while, I realized that that was a dumb thing to do. And I’m not sure whether the knitting still happens. Does it?

GREIDER: I’ve heard — I think maybe it has in recent years. I feel like it goes through fads.
HURWITZ: You know, I think it’s rude. The idea was, oh, well, why don’t I make a sweater while I’m listening? I won’t take as many notes and I won’t do — but I look back on it and I think, What were we doing? What were we doing? I mean, we could — were we learning to multitask? You know? Like, mothers-to-be? Were we Madame Defarges trying to cook up a revolution? What — and I still don’t know the answer to that, but I remember being challenged, resisting the challenge, and then recognizing no, she was right. So there’s a story for you.

GREIDER: Did you go abroad while you were here?

HURWITZ: Well, yeah, but not as a formal Smith abroad program. I went — I was into things Russian, and so I was going abroad in the summertime over there. And I traveled abroad in general in the summers. But I didn’t go on the junior year abroad program.

GREIDER: OK. Were you involved in any extracurriculars? Like clubs, or sports, or anything like that?

HURWITZ: Probably. I used to go to concerts all the time, because I adore music. And I was not — and I was very — I was so involved in my studies. So, you know, almost seven times twenty-four, I was a student. And that’s just me, and it’s still me. So I wasn’t involved that much in formal extracurricular activities. But I got to know a number of people very, very well, and we would travel. You know, we would sit around and discuss our reading into all hours of the night. So there were informal things rather than extracurriculars as such.

GREIDER: So how did you get to know those people?

HURWITZ: Well, through classes, through — I guess I learned at Smith how to discern among people who was saying something really interesting that I wanted to pursue. And if that was the case, I had the confidence and the — and I was encouraged to pursue it. So I just kind of sought out interesting people.

GREIDER: So what kinds of things did you do for fun?

HURWITZ: Well, I used to take hikes. I used to love taking hikes in the mountains. I would occasionally go off to Amherst and Williams, and go play in the evenings with the opposite sex. Go to New York — enjoy New York City a lot. Let’s see, what else would I do? And I love to read, and sit around and sip wine, and have a good time. And I had faculty who were very, very open to bringing the students into their homes for seminars, and for informal gatherings. So Smith was always fascinating to me.

GREIDER: Did you have any experiences with relationships or dating while you were here?
HURWITZ: Oh sure. I had a couple of different boyfriends up at those boys’ schools I was telling you about. They were boys’ schools at the time, they weren’t coed. I did, yeah. They were OK.

GREIDER: (laughs) OK. What would you say the dating culture was like at Smith?

HURWITZ: Hard to generalize about. It was always a little mysterious to me. I don’t think it was orchestrated. I don’t think — there was an implied — most people were interested in dating, but there were no structures, really, in place to do so, except going to mixers at the neighboring schools, and we would do that, or being fixed up with a friend of a friend. That was the culture; it was informal and it was subtle. And for example, as a Jewish student, there was an assumption that I would only date Jews. And I thought, Wha-aa? You know, that never happened to me when I was growing up. Why would it happen now? And at Smith, too, I was put with a Jewish roommate, and I go, Why? So I went to the dean, and they — well, we thought you’d be more comfortable. And I was, like, blown away. So the same thing was, you know, if you’re Jewish, you want to date Jewish people. And I, of course, would say, I don’t know, maybe, maybe not.

GREIDER: So do you feel like being Jewish changed your experience of being here? Or people’s perceptions of you?

HURWITZ: I don’t know. Probably. Probably in ways that were very, very subtle, they did. It did. Maybe, you know, I’m intense, and I grew up intense, and that’s sort of a quality of our extended tribe, and very interested in the arts and in politics. Same thing. But yet we crossed over so much. What I loved about Smith is that you could cross over and talk to people across faiths, faith traditions, and national traditions. So I’m sure it had some impact, but it was subtle. Yeah.

GREIDER: Do you remember any controversies that went on while you were here? Or political issues that were being discussed a lot?

HURWITZ: You know, I don’t recall the kind of controversy that we’re dealing with right now at Smith happening. I do recall some subtle things. I was a student of Russian history, and there was a certain amount of Cold War, pre-Cold War attitude. So if you were studying things Russian, people had to be careful, or you had to be careful in some sense not to suggest that you were a red, and you were a pro-communist person. And that era annoyed me very, very much. So there was that. And certainly, we were, as women, aware that we weren’t necessarily being treated with the respect that we wanted to. And the controversy, we had teas at Smith. I don’t know, do you still have teas?

GREIDER: We do.
HURWITZ: And there’s nothing wrong with a tea party. You can wage a revolution through tea. But it always seemed to be a little bit staid, stuffy, MRS-y. You know, there for training us to be good wives and planners of parties. But at the same time, it had other implications. So a lot of us were trying to figure out, well, what does it mean to be a woman in the 1960s? So that was in the air. And so was, of course, the Red Scare, and McCarthy, and this idea that if you were interested in things in a communist, or – society, you must be a communist. It was there. Those are issues of today that were already surfacing at Smith.

GREIDER: So what did you feel like it did mean to be a woman in the ’60s? Or what were the thoughts at Smith about that?

HURWITZ: I think we got mixed signals about what we were supposed to be doing with our lives. Our commencement speaker was Dean Rusk. Dean Rusk was Secretary of State, or secretary of something-or-other. I think State, but I may have that wrong right now. Anyway, his message to us as graduating seniors was, it’s an interesting world out there, you know. And oh yes, maybe you women can join it. You know? But it was more of a man’s world, and we were on the periphery coming in, you know? So I guess being a woman in the ’60s, I was such an independent, stubborn person. On the one hand, I was ready to take on the world. On the other hand, I felt myself thinking, I’m really here to please some guy, and I ought to be second. And so I was at once way first, and then sort of second. I could never — I couldn’t calibrate it. And a lot of us were feeling that way. And Smith was a very social place, country-clubby place. And I didn’t quite know what to do about that. (laughter)

GREIDER: Did you feel like civil rights was much of an issue on campus? Or were people very aware of that?

HURWITZ: Oh yeah. Yeah, I’d say yes. There was a strong interest in — African Studies were surfacing, and there was certainly an interest in the Civil Rights Movement. But, you know, I grew up in a very — I don’t know what to say — multiracial environment, so I assumed that it was a fairly activist stance, and civil rights was part of what we were supposed to be doing. And so that was going on. Yeah, it was.

GREIDER: I heard that George Wallace came to speak. Do you remember that?

HURWITZ: He did, but I don’t remember it.

GREIDER: OK. That’s fine.

HURWITZ: No, I mean, either I suppressed it, or I — he did, or I wasn’t there, or I thought it was perfectly OK to have the George Wallaces of this world come to Smith, because you need to be exposed to the range of — you
need to be — a range of perspectives. Otherwise, how in the world are you going to manage these folks when you get out? And, you know, recently, I was in an elevator with Mr. Cheney. And you have to manage that. You can’t just be so narrow that you don’t have the experience and the wisdom to navigate in complex situations. I believe.

GREIDER: So how would you describe the campus atmosphere when you were here?

HURWITZ: Intense, positive, energetic, eclectic, accommodating a range of interests and skills, including my intense academic one. Very much — there was a sense of greatness about Smith. In the environment, in the architecture, in the people who were here, that lifted you to a confidence to take on the world. And it was very sophisticated, very multicultural. Today, I was listening to some of the women soloists in the — at the concert sing in French. And the French is listed in the program, and a number of us are following along. I think — I don’t take that for granted. Not every school does that. So, and that’s the tradition I was introduced to here, among other places, and it was extremely — it was exquisitely nuanced, and distinctive, and it changed my life, I mean, because I thought well, if we could — I grew up with some of this, but if we could do it here, and when I was — therefore, I can do it anywhere myself. And so it changed how I’ve lived my life as an educator. Which, of course, I am.

GREIDER: So talk a little bit about what you’ve done since graduation.

HURWITZ: Well, I went to graduate school in Russian and Byzantine and Western medieval history. Got myself a Ph.D. Went off to teach at Wesleyan, then Lafayette College, then gradually morphed into an administrator, and was a university president at three different schools, two in the US, one over in Central Asia. So—

GREIDER: So do you feel like—

HURWITZ: And now I write, write, write, you know? So that’s my story.

GREIDER: How do you think Smith prepares women for leadership positions? Like—

HURWITZ: Very well. As I said to you primarily — and I’ve been writing about leadership, and writing about some of my experiences at Smith, and leadership. I think it enabled. It was an enabling place. If you had a leadership inclination, all the forces militated in favor of your development of that inclination. It didn’t force you. And believe me, if you wanted to be second fiddle to some guy, you could do that too. But it made it possible. So I’m grateful to Smith for that. That’s more — and it also developed the mind in such a way that you could function as a
leader in complex situations, where in which you were exposed to a range of points — I’m going to keep harping on that — a range of points of view, not all of which you were comfortable with, some of which were anathema to you. And yet because you were exposed, you learned how to deal with that range effectively. So that was — and graduate school was a piece of cake after Smith, so it was easy for you to become a leader in graduate school, even if you weren’t as much so at Smith. And at Smith, you know, I would take math, and I was good at it, so someone said, “Go tutor.” So I would — I thought, Oh, that’s interesting. I like teaching. Maybe I’ll try that later. And it was just permission to develop. That, to me, is the most important thing about Smith, and the atmosphere was infectious, because whatever you wanted to do, you could do. Within reason.

GREIDER: So you’re saying that Smith exposed you to, like, a range of viewpoints?

HURWITZ: Sure.

GREIDER: What kinds of viewpoints were you exposed to that you weren’t familiar with or didn’t — couldn’t sympathize with?

HURWITZ: Well, my parents were nice, liberal Democrats, you know? And I was exposed at Smith to some folks who were not that way, on the left and on the right. In those days, the left was far, far to the left of liberalism. Now, you know, there’s this simplistic notion that anything to the left of center is left, which is absurd, but that’s what’s going on here. So there was a range on the left, there was a range on the right. So in terms of the political spectrum, I got to meet all kinds of people with all kinds of sentiments, and there was a healthy debate going on all the time. So there’s one example of it.

Attitudes toward women ran the gamut as well. That was instructive and helpful, actually. But mainly, it was the erudition across such a range of areas. And yeah, I grew up in an educated environment, but not like this. And so, you know, the ability to study the history of Armenia, for example, or the ability to, I don’t know, to study Old Russian, Church Slavonic at Smith. I mean, I could try anything, and I did. And it was all here for us. And you could create your own course, and you could create your own senior thesis. And I was trying to study, as I rec— I’m forgetting, but I’m trying to remember — I was trying to understand how representative assemblies worked in Russia, because they were very different from in this country and our history. And so I studied that. And I was encouraged to do so. That’s the most important thing. So, and that changed the way I taught, and I developed as a professional.

GREIDER: Can you tell me a story about one of your favorite memories from your time here?
HURWITZ: I’m working on it.

GREIDER: OK. (laughs)

HURWITZ: I keep thinking about the seminars that I had with Professor [Garsoyon?], who was a Byzantine Armenian historian. The seminars were in her home. Her mother was — spoke Russian, and we all spoke Russian, and she would cook the most exquisite meals. And there was this sense that — there was no line, strict line between the personal and the professional, because you could morph from being taught and teaching and discussing to eating and then going back and forth. It was kind of a living seminar. And I think that’s my most beautiful memory, having those kinds of classes.

GREIDER: So do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

HURWITZ: Well, to reach out beyond the comfort zone. Whatever, really, that’s the most important thing to say, and to talk to people whose views are different from yours, and who know things you don’t know. And even if you’re not at the top of a field, whether it’s music or skiing, try it anyway, and just stretch yourself. Because the opportunities are just so exquisite here. And get out. Today, I was looking at the gardens. I never looked at the gardens before. And I ran into a professor of math, and we started to talk about what it’s like to come back and look at gardens, and why we didn’t look when we were young, and now why — what was different then? Why didn’t — and I’m still puzzled about that as I try to close this interview and think about my reunion. You know, you pick things that are comfortable, and then some that are not. But I think if I look back, I wish I had pressed more envelopes and done even more.

GREIDER: So just tell me a little bit about why you came for reunion. And have you been back to a reunion?

HURWITZ: Oh. This is my first ever. First of all, I’ve been too busy. I’ve been — I’ve raised three children, you know? I’ve had a pretty busy, demanding career. The life of a college president is — well, I did that for twenty years. And it never stops. It’s seven times twenty-four. So I knew that the reunions were happening, but who had time? This is the first time I’ve really had time, because I’ve slowed down enough not to be running something, at least something that’s seven times twenty-four. And so I wanted to come back and see, and see faces, and see the campus. And, you know, there’s time in my life now to take a couple of days and do this. So that’s why I came.

GREIDER: So what is it like to be back here?

HURWITZ: Well, I just got back a few hours ago. So I’m still processing. I’m amazed at how much I do remember. Geographically, and how many
Ellen Hurwitz, interviewed by Julia Greider

faces I remember. If your attitude is — if you’re mired in the past, you just think, Well, it was better when we were here. If you’re open to change and to thinking about how has it changed, and why has it changed, and what’s happening now, then I think you’re in for — I know I’m in for a treat.

Now again, I’m concerned about the current controversy [about Christine Lagarde as commencement speaker], because I think it reflects not necessarily a positive change, because the open-mindedness is what brought me to Smith in the first place, and I wish it could continue. And I hope maybe this is a teaching moment for the college, and for everybody that, you know, maybe even the world at large, because the world at large isn’t as open-minded as it used to be. So it’s hard for a woman to be in a leadership position and be open-minded. It really is, whether you’re talking about running for president of the United States, or head of the IMF, or whatever it is, it’s hard. So I empathize with folks in those positions, and the compromises that they have to make. So, but I would love to talk to the students on the other side of today who were saying, “Wait a minute, this isn’t right for us,” and hear their point of view. So —

GREIDER: Well, just in wrapping this up, is there anything else that you’d like to talk about that I haven’t touched on that feels important to your experience here?

HURWITZ: Well, I probably will think of something, you know, tomorrow and the next day, as I go through the experience of being here. I think it’s a privilege to be part of this community, and I think it’s — I think the alumnae of Smith feel that connection powerfully, whether they march in the parade or not. We are Smithies for a lifetime. And that’s a very important thing to know if you’re a student. And so when you decide to come here, it’s a life — it’s a decision — it’s a lifelong decision. And I’m grateful beyond belief that the school is doing as well as it is, and is thriving, and will continue to. OK.

GREIDER: Great. Thank you so much for doing this interview.

HURWITZ: No, not at all. You’re welcome. OK.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kristofer Jenson, June 2014.