

**Memorial Minute for Charles Langner Robertson, October 27, 2021 Faculty Meeting  
Written and Read by Gregory White, Government Department, Smith College**

**Charles Langner Robertson** – known to family and friends as “Carlo” because of his birth in Milan – died on July 5 at the age of 93.

Carlo was born in Milan in 1927 and raised in Geneva and Brussels before his family returned to the states in the late 30s, when World War II began. The family moved to Chicago, where Carlo graduated from Evanston HS at the age of 17, and soon returned to Europe, serving in the US Army from 1945-1947 as an officer in the Counter-Intelligence Corps. In 1950, Carlo graduated from Northwestern University with a BS in Economics and an MA in International Relations. By 1951 he was back in Europe, this time to the University of Strasbourg in the newly-established Fulbright Program.

Carlo returned to the states and promptly enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Princeton in 1951. He joined the Smith faculty in 1954 – ultimately completing his doctorate in Politics in 1959.

The reason for conveying this detail is the fact that upon his arrival at Smith in 1954, at the age of 27, Carlo had an admirable wealth of international experience, education, and military service. He was trans-Atlantic, cosmopolitan, worldly – in the deepest senses of the terms – and drew on that experience and outlook throughout his career and, indeed, his life.

At Smith, over the years, Carlo taught in the Government department upon his arrival in 1954 until his retirement from teaching in 1990. He then served as Associate Dean for International Studies from 1990-93. A Smith career of nearly 40 years that ended nearly 30 years ago. I recall a few years ago that Carlo remarked that he had taught Gloria Steinem (class of '56), and that it unnerved him when he saw in the news that she had turned 80 years old. “My former students are turning 80!”

Here in our department, Carlo served as chair. If I am reading his CV right, and I think I am, one term as chair was for 9 years! Carlo also served on major college committees and, most notably, was the director of the Smith Junior Year in Geneva program three times. Carlo also accompanied his beloved wife, Denise Rochat (our dear friend and emeritus colleague in French Studies), when she directed three

Junior Years in Geneva and two in Paris. On that score alone, Carlo surely helped to shape the experience of so many Smith students for whom the year abroad is so deeply formative.

Although he was trained in economics as an undergrad and in political science in graduate school, Carlo was a historian at heart. His passion as a scholar was diplomatic history – especially mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe which, of course, coincided with his own personal experience. He also was attracted to biographical accounts. It was not a great man or great person approach to history – to the contrary, Carlo had a nuanced understanding of the historical forces in which people acted. But he nevertheless focused on the play and action and thoughts of individuals. Given his temporal focus, this meant an attention to Roosevelt, de Gaulle, Truman, and Eisenhower. But he was also an avid reader of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> biographies. Not too long ago, he remarked that he was reading a biography of Napoleon and added something like, “You know, it actually makes you feel better about circumstances today. I mean things were really far worse back then.”

In retirement, Carlo remained very active as a scholar. For example, he wrote an intellectual biography of Pauline Avery Crawford and her work at the Paris edition of the New York *Herald Tribune*. Entitled *An American Poet in Paris* (2001), Carlo’s book recounts Crawford’s writings in the 30s and 40s and the profound impact it had on the US expatriate community in Paris. This political biography grew out of an earlier book Carlo wrote entitled *The International Herald Tribune: The First Hundred Years* (1987). Carlo also wrote a book on *When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France* (2011) – about a secret plan by Roosevelt in 1943 and 1944 to occupy France after liberation, a plan that deeply affected De Gaulle when he learned of it and, of course, post-war Franco-American diplomacy. In recent years Carlo was working on Americans who remained in Paris during the German occupation. The working title of the manuscript was “They Stayed.”

Reading Carlo’s work is a delight. He is a marvelous, fluid writer. He pays attention to historical detail and context. And, most of all, I think, as his remark about Napoleon’s era evinced, his work is marked with an abiding optimism. In international relations terms, Carlo’s work – and I would say his personality, too – had a deep idealism and hope. Even as he was deeply aware of *realpolitik* and power

politics and the capacity for dreadful events to take place, Carlo conveyed a sense that we humans often have a profound capacity for goodness and kindness – and that things could be better.

Those of us who had the pleasure of interchanges with Carlo know that he always had an appealing openness to life. He would often talk about history and politics, yes, but also family, music, food, wine, travel, movies... and he would do so with a brightness, a deep kindness, and genuine *joie de vivre*.

Carlo devoted his career to Smith. He lived a long, rich life and will be deeply missed.