

A TRIBUTE TO NELLY SCHARGO HOYT, ACHILLES PROFESSOR OF HISTORY  
28 January 1920 – 27 September 2015  
Member Department of History 1949 – 1990

Nelly Schargo Hoyt, '43, Achilles Professor of History (emerita) died Sunday, September 27, 2015 in Northampton at the age of ninety-five, having retreated in her last years to a world no longer accessible to her family and friends.

During her forty years (1949 until 1990) on the Faculty of Smith College, Nelly Hoyt played a signal role in the Department of History, in interdisciplinary studies and symposia at the College, and as Chair of the Education Committee of the Alumnae Association. For this distinguished service Nelly was honored on Rally Day in 1989 with a Smith College Medal.

Nelly Schargo was born in 1920 in the Ukrainian city of Nikolaev at the time of the Russian civil war. Her first language was Russian, the language of her parents, both of whom had a university education. Her family fled Soviet Russia in 1922 and settled in Berlin, where Nelly grew up and received her early schooling in German. The establishment of the Nazi regime in Germany in 1933 prompted her family to move to Paris, where Nelly attended a lycée and received a baccalauréat in 1939, having become by then faultlessly fluent in French. A personal avocation during these years was participating in the Ballet de Jeunesse. Nelly began her higher education in the field of Anthropology at the University of Paris and the Musée de l'Homme in the opening months of World War II. After the Fall of France in 1940, Nelly and her parents fled via Marseille and Portugal to the United States, landing in New York in 1941. In September 1941, Nelly entered Smith College as a junior on a scholarship, initially writing her papers in French. By the time of her graduation, two years later, she had acquired complete fluency in English, her fourth modern language.

Admitted to Columbia University with a fellowship for graduate study in History, Nelly received her doctorate within three years in 1946 with a

dissertation on the treatment of History in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert. There followed a three-year interlude in New York serving as a reference analyst for the United States Mission at the United Nations and as a Research Associate for anthropological studies directed by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead at Columbia University and the Museum of Natural History.

A visit to Smith College early in 1949 with her husband, Deming Hoyt, whom Nelly had married in 1947, resulted in an invitation to join the Department of History at Smith. Here she regularly team-taught in the Department's introductory course in European history, as well as offering her own advanced courses on the Age of Monarchy in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe and particularly on the Enlightenment in France. An exemplary scholar, Nelly taught her students to take full advantage of the riches available in Neilson Library's open stacks, while insuring that the primary sources and current literature in her field would continue to be well represented for future generations. Part of that legacy included, for instance, arranging the purchase in 1961 of the original edition (1751-1772) of the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert, of whose major articles she later published, in collaboration with Thomas Cassirer, an English translation with commentary.<sup>1</sup>

As a tribute to distinguished women members of the Smith College faculty from ca. 1890 to ca. 1950, Nelly offered in 1987 an Interterm Seminar entitled "Ladies of the Faculty". The seminar was based on research in the College Archives and focused, for example, on the careers of Mary Ellen Chase, Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Ruth Wedgwood Kennedy. Several students found this project so engaging that they continued it without further course credit under Nelly's direction for two more semesters.

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia; Selections <by> Diderot, D'Alembert and a Society of Men of Letters*. Translated, with an Introduction and Notes by Nelly S. Hoyt <and> Thomas Cassirer, Indianapolis, Ind., 1965.

A gifted teacher who encouraged her students to develop their potential, Nelly received in 1989 the senior faculty award for excellence in teaching. Nelly was a pioneer at the College in offering interdisciplinary courses with colleagues from other Departments. Many of these had a predominantly 20<sup>th</sup> century focus, for example a colloquium *The Experience of Exile* (1989-90) taught with Peter Rose from Sociology. As an offshoot of her interest in the *Encyclopédie* with its superb illustrations of the mechanical arts, Nelly had a leading role in organizing the College's Interdisciplinary Program in the History of the Natural Sciences. Nelly Hoyt served the Department of History as Chair (1977-1979), as editor of four volumes of the *Smith College Studies in History*, and the College as member of a variety of major committees.

As an alumna who was also a member of the Faculty, Nelly served as Chair of the Alumnae Association's Education Committee from 1972 to-1977. In this capacity she organized the programs of Alumnae College and later also was a highly regarded lecturer on Alumnae travel along the Baltic and in Burgundy. Nelly's notes for these lectures, kept in the College Archives, make evident why her audience responded to them with enthusiasm.

Nelly was a strong supporter of the College's Junior Year Abroad Programs, both as an adviser and as Director of the Smith Junior Year Programs in Geneva (1968-69) and later in Hamburg (1991-92). In addition, she played a critical role in defining (April 1980) the pattern of Faculty Exchanges between Smith College and the University of Hamburg, a program in which she subsequently participated in the Spring Semesters of 1982, 1985 and 1988. Here Nelly offered in German lecture courses on the Enlightenment as well as research seminars on Voyages of Exploration, geographical as well as literary, and a critical examination of eighteenth-century utopias. Acclaimed by colleagues and students on intellectual as well as on pedagogical grounds, these offerings served to strengthen the College's standing at the University of Hamburg in the early years of the Faculty Exchange.

Nelly Hoyt's scholarship shifted in the 1980's from the *Encyclopédie* and its contributors to members of the next generation in France and Central Europe who sought to apply the political and social principles of the Enlightenment in what became the French Revolution. Her focus in studying this process was the life of Peter Ochs, a member of a family of merchants prominent in the political and intellectual life of the city of Basel. Born in Nantes with French as his first language, Ochs spent his youth with a branch of the family firm in Hamburg, studied law at Leiden, and then embarked on a political *cursus honorum* in Basel. As an enlightened *homme de lettres*, Ochs favored the transformation of the old Swiss Confederation in accordance with the principles of equality before the law and religious toleration introduced during the Revolution in France. This led Ochs to play a controversial role in the establishment of the Helvetic Republic in 1798 which coincided with French military intervention. In an article published in Basel in 1987 Nelly portrayed the political philosophy and career of Peter Ochs and set out to question the validity of the charges against him that led in 1799 to his abrupt resignation as one of Directors of the Helvetic Republic after only eleven months in office.<sup>2</sup> At issue was the sympathy of Ochs for the policies of the Directory in revolutionary France and the effectiveness of his defense of the Swiss tradition of neutrality among the European powers, a question debated extensively by historians at Basel.

No record of Nelly Hoyt's contributions to Smith College as an intellectual community would be complete without a tribute to her cordial and elegant hospitality at her home in Northampton and her summer home in Barton, Vermont, where she welcomed students, alumnae and colleagues as well as visiting scholars from abroad who had taught at Smith. Colleagues and friends from a variety of Departments would remember her New Year's

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<sup>2</sup> Nelly S. Hoyt, "Peter Ochs, Aufklärer, Staatsmann, Verräter?", in: *Basler Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Altertumskunde*, 87 (1987), 71-93.

receptions that were at once intellectually stimulating, cordial and elegant. Throughout her career, Nelly Hoyt graciously enriched the lives of her students and her colleagues. They remember her with admiration and affection.

Submitted by: Joachim Stieber, Prof. of History (emeritus), a colleague of Nelly Hoyt in the Department of History, 1968-1990.