

Memorial Minute for Klemens von Klemperer
Read at the April 3, 2013 Faculty Meeting by Joachim Stieber,
colleague of Klemens von Klemperer in the Department of History, 1968-1987

The scholarly contributions of Klemens von Klemperer, L. Clark Seelye Professor emeritus, a member of the Department of History from 1949 until 1987, were widely honored by his professional peers in the United States and in Europe. Following his death on December 23 2012, obituaries in major newspapers in New York, London, Berlin and Vienna paid tribute to his studies of German conservative thought and its criticism of parliamentary politics, to his history of the Austrian Republic of the 1920's, and above all, to his major publications on the German Resistance against Hitler and its Search for Allies abroad.¹

Here today our focus will be on the role of Klemens as a colleague at Smith College who had come to the United States as a refugee from Hitler's Germany and Austria. Born in 1916 in Berlin, he grew up in a family of bankers and business men of Jewish ancestry but secular orientation. The family's identification with German Protestant culture meant that Klemens, his two brothers and his sister were baptized and confirmed as Lutheran Christians. A formative influence was his attendance at the Französische Gymnasium also known as the Collège français, a school of choice for families with ambitions for their sons, with students predominantly from the Prussian nobility and the cultured middle class. By his report, Klemens von Klemperer had an exceptionally good experience, intellectually and socially, at the Collège, forming close friendships that held fast through all subsequent political vicissitudes. Yet by the time of his graduation in 1934 Hitler had come to power and prospects looked grim in Germany for anyone of Jewish ancestry. Since von Klemperer's family on his mother's side resided in Vienna, he joined his Austrian relatives there and enrolled in the University to study the history of law until 1938, when the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany led him to seek refuge in the United States.

Fortunate to be awarded a refugee scholarship from Harvard University, von Klemperer embarked there in 1939 on the study of European history. After the United States joined the war against Hitler's Germany, he interrupted his studies in 1943 to volunteer for service in the United States Army and also became an American citizen. Assigned to Army Intelligence for the evaluation of captured German documents, von Klemperer served with General Eisenhower's headquarters, successively in London, Paris, and Frankfurt. In 1946, he returned to Harvard University where he completed his PhD in modern European history in 1949.

First at Harvard and then at Smith College where he joined the Department of History in 1949, von Klemperer acquired a deep appreciation of American intellectual communities in a residential setting in New England which became a new home to him. In the case of Klemens, this engagement was complemented by his gift for forming and cultivating ties of friendship, reinforcing shared intellectual and personal affinities that enriched those around him. A unique such double tie was his marriage to Elisabeth Gallaher, a graduate of Smith College and member of the Department of English Literature. Together, Klemens and Betty made their home on Washington Avenue the setting of intellectual

¹ *New York Times*, 7 January 2013; *Telegraph* (London), 14 January 2013; *Die Presse* (Vienna), 25 January 2013; *Tagesspiegel* (Berlin), 8 February 2013; *The Times* (London), 19 February 2013 .

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and social gatherings of colleagues from a variety of disciplines, including at times visitors from abroad and returning alumnae.

As a member of the Smith College faculty for thirty-eight years (1949-1987), Klemens served as Chair of the Department of History for four years and for many more on its Curriculum Committee. In the College he served on the Committee on Honors as Chair (1967-1969) and on the Committee on Academic Policy (1983-1985). Sensitive to threats to academic freedom, he argued strongly for keeping partisan politics out of the academy. Thus, when in 1961 the Department of History was offered a substantial sum by an alumna for “anti-communist” books for the library, he successfully argued as Chair, that the Department should not be put in the position of selecting books on the basis of political rather than academic criteria. The administration yielded, and the check was politely returned. The same issue arose in another context in May 1970, when many students and faculty, including von Klemperer, were appalled by the expansion of the Vietnam conflict to Cambodia. Nonetheless, he joined 68 other members of the faculty in a declaration that the institutional neutrality of the College should be maintained. Throughout his contacts with the Department which continued in retirement for twenty-five years, Klemens was for many not only a professional colleague but also a compassionate friend. Junior members could count on his respect for their vision of how they could contribute to the Department as well as tactful counsel in professional matters – and encouragement with a smile. To older colleagues and their families, he was generous and compassionate in his concern for their well-being.

The gift of Klemens von Klemperer for friendship also informed the major project of his career as a historian, the study of the German Resistance against Hitler. Ties of loyalty and friendship established during his years at the Collège français in Berlin with contemporaries who had opposed the rise of Hitler, prompted his research and insistence that there had been those who resisted the Nazi régime. It was in his Engel Lecture at Smith College in 1968, the year of student protests in the United States and in Europe, that von Klemperer first suggested that the actions of the opponents of Hitler transcended calculations of success and failure and were based on a moral imperative.² This led him to the role of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who as early as 1933 had come to see Hitler’s régime as inherently evil and who eventually justified resistance to established government in the name of a higher law.³ For articulating such views Bonhoeffer was imprisoned in April 1943 and executed two years later in the last month of the Hitler regime. In his study of the efforts of the German resistance to find allies abroad, Klemens made evident that when Bonhoeffer met in 1942 with churchmen like Willem A. Visser ‘t- Hooft of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and with George

² Klemens von Klemperer, *Mandate for Resistance: The Case of the German Opposition to Hitler* (Northampton, Mass. 1969), with an initial reference to Sophocles’ symbolic figure of Antigone, p. 1, and on the German resistance as transcending realistic calculations of success and failure, p. 28.

³ Klemens von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad, 1938-1945* (Oxford 1992), Bonhoeffer on resistance as ‘true patriotism’, p. 40-42, 198, further on Bonhoeffer, Index, p. 474. See also von Klemperer, “Totalitarianism and Resistance in Germany: Dietrich Bonhoeffer”, in *The Terrible Alternative: Christian Martyrdom in the Twentieth Century*. Ed. Andrew Chandler (London 1998), p. 81-101, and von Klemperer, “Naturrecht und der deutsche Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus: Ein Beitrag zur Frage des deutschen ‘Sonderwegs’“, in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 40 (1992), p. 323-337; on Bonhoeffer, p. 331-335.

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Bell, the Bishop of Chichester in neutral Sweden, he not only acknowledged the evils committed in the name of Germany, but insisted on repentance as a prerequisite for eventual reconciliation.⁴ It was the willingness of Visser-'t-Hooft and the Bishop of Chichester to take seriously the commitment of members of the German Resistance to these issues that led Klemens to dedicate his book on the German Resistance against Hitler to the English bishop and the Dutch churchman. Klemens admired these men and shared their hope of reconciliation and of the eventual reintegration of Austria and Germany in a new political and social order in Europe. The scholarship of von Klemperer on the German resistance thus reflects not only his role as a historian who respects the details of the evidence and analyzes its complexities, but also his generosity of spirit.

The world at large knows and honors Klemens von Klemperer primarily as a scholar, yet at Smith College we, who were privileged to know him as a colleague and a friend, remember him also with affection. We shall miss him.

⁴ von Klemperer, *German Resistance Against Hitler*, p. 286, Bonhoeffer at a meeting in Siguna, Sweden, May 1942.