

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Edith Bershadsky, Class of 1977

Interviewed by
Kirby Vasquez, Class of 2014

May 26, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Edith Bershadsky describes her experiences living in Sessions House, specifically her experience dining with the male exchange students, the tradition of tea, being a feminist, and the strong friendships she formed at Smith.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Bershadsky, Edith. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Edith Bershadsky, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Bershadsky, Edith. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Edith Bershadsky, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 26, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 26, 2012, with:

EDITH BERSHADSKY

by: KIRBY VASQUEZ

VASQUEZ: So my name is Kirby Vasquez. It is May 26, 2012 and I am here doing an interview for the Alumnae History Project. Would you like to start out by introducing yourself and your class year?

BERSHADSKY: My name is Edith Bershadsky. I graduated in 1977. I lived in Sessions House.

VASQUEZ: So why did you choose to come to Smith College?

BERSHADSKY: I thought women should have careers, not just rely on their husbands to support them. I thought it gave them more freedom to choose to do the kinds of things they wanted to do whether it was freedom to give to the charity that they cared about or to choose the clothes that they wanted to buy or to help get more of a say in the kind of education they wanted to give their children, whatever they wanted to do with their life. I felt they had more control if they had more financial independence.

VASQUEZ: And where were you coming from?

BERSHADSKY: I went to a good public high school in Madison, New Jersey.

VASQUEZ: And do you remember your first couple of days here and what it was like and the atmosphere and how you were feeling?

BERSHADSKY: Well, I lived in a very small house on campus, the oldest house on campus actually, so that was lovely, in an old part of that old house. I don't remember orientation that well except that I didn't like my freshman year roommate. She was terrible. Though I didn't change roommates, so I just took it. And that was difficult, but I made other -- very good friends my freshman year, so I think that's what I really remember about my first semester at Smith and I also remember that I took an English course that I didn't like because I got intimidated just by somebody else, not that she meant to intimidate me, by somebody else. So I took an English course I didn't like instead of taking the English course I should have taken at the start, English 207, which is a great course I took as a senior instead, and I had had AP English and done pretty well, so I should have just gone ahead

and done that instead of wasting some of my valuable course time doing things that didn't make much sense to me.

VASQUEZ: And how was living in the oldest house, how was the house community, how was living there?

BERSHADSKY: The oldest house on campus, Sessions. Well, there was one big difference between Sessions and a lot of the other houses on campus, because in those days, Sessions Annex, that was the house right next to us, housed the male exchange students and there were two other houses on campus that were like that in those days. So because we had the male exchange students, they ate meals with us because in those days we had in-house dining at Smith and they no longer do that. They have a number of different big cafeterias in different, you know, larger houses, but Sessions had its own dining room. There was family dining at night and on Sundays and then otherwise it was buffet. But we were used to having men around so I don't think we had quite the same experience as students who were in the exclusively female dorms. Yeah. And some of the girls in our house were certainly interested in the guys in the annex.

VASQUEZ: So do you remember some of your favorite Smith traditions that you had while living here?

BERSHADSKY: My?

VASQUEZ: Favorite Smith traditions?

BERSHADSKY: Smith traditions. Oh, I liked tea and cookies in the afternoon. In our house we used to have them on both Wednesdays and Fridays, so that was nice. I guess I liked the Big Sister tradition. We used to have a nice Halloween party -- well, sort of tradition because we lived in such an old house, it had a secret staircase and I guess a pathway -- it was a stop on the underground railroad and it had a path to Paradise Pond, I think.

So it was a very dangerous thing to go in generally, because it just -- the fire life in that house, at least in the attic, was like 30 seconds long, and people sometimes used to smoke in the houses in those days. I'm sure they sometimes do now. But in such an old house, it could go up really quickly and they would just open the secret staircase on like Halloween I think or about that time of year and people would go searching for the secret staircase. That was kind of fun.

VASQUEZ: I didn't even know that existed. Were you part of any organizations or clubs or sports while you were on campus?

BERSHADSKY: I didn't do any sports. I was a house officer at one point. I think maybe it was my sophomore year, but I'm not that administratively oriented, so I think I was sort of jockeyed into it. It wasn't really something I was

enthusiastic about doing. Let's see, I made my best friends for life, pretty much, at Smith, so my college friends for the most part, they've been my really close friends ever since. But I wasn't very organizational. So let's see, what could I say? I wasn't really involved in many organizations that I can think of.

VASQUEZ: What -- can you explain more about what it meant to be a house officer or what you did and what that experience was like?

BERSHADSKY: Well, at -- in our house I was the treasurer so I had to go around and collect money, something I didn't really enjoy doing as many people do not. We had our own washing machine in the house and dryer if I remember correctly, but I remember about the washing machine. We had our own soda machines, so that there were certain things that came with raising money that you could get -- buy your own equipment of that kind and your own appliances and then get more personal freedom, I guess. And I'm not sure how they do things now in the houses, if it's still like that that you -- the house could go out and buy and a washing machine and then -- I guess -- I don't remember whether we charged nothing or just a small amount for people to do their wash, probably nothing. So that, you know, and I don't remember if people -- if they charged house dues or anything like that. I just don't remember that.

VASQUEZ: And did you have good relationships with your professors or mentors?

BERSHADSKY: I had good relationships with some, not so good with others. I don't think I had the best -- you know, I really liked some of my professors, but I don't think they were the best at helping -- I was very shy when I was in college. I don't think they were the best ones at helping me get over that, and I think some of that was personal -- some of that was just being senior male scholars. They were not that good at helping women overcome those kinds of insecurities, I don't think. So let's see -- yeah, I think that would be about it and later on in college when I was maybe a senior I had some women prof -- you know, female professors that I really liked and I kind of thought -- they dealt with things a little bit differently than the men did.

VASQUEZ: And did you go abroad?

BERSHADSKY: No, no, I did not go abroad when I was in college, but I have spent a lot of time living abroad since I graduated.

VASQUEZ: Like to where?

BERSHADSKY: I spent a short amount of time, just a couple of months living as a grad student when I was -- a grad student at Hopkins. I went to Italy -- to Florence for a short time, but I lived for almost five years in Britain, first as a grad student in Oxford and then doing a post doc in Scotland and then I taught for a year and a half in London. So I spent almost -- well, like

four and a half years, thereabouts in Britain. So I got to know Britain pretty well.

VASQUEZ: And what was -- aside from the male house next door, what were the experiences with like -- like did you have any experiences with like relationships while you were here, or dating here?

BERSHADSKY: No, I didn't really date much here. So can't really say that I did. I mean I met some men when I went to parties, but I really didn't date much here.

VASQUEZ: And so what was -- what did you do for fun in the social scene here?

BERSHADSKY: I had really good women friends. So you know, like I say, I made my good friends here and sometimes we went off to parties. We went off to Yale a number of times, that was the main place we went to and partly because my roommate was -- my sophomore year roommate was from New Haven, so I visited her house, oh, repeatedly, and then we had a friend from the annex who had gone -- who was -- I think a sophomore or junior at Yale when we met him, so we sometimes visited him. So we -- yeah, we just had fun doing different things.

VASQUEZ: And during your time here, would you have considered Smith an accepting place, whether it was like a minority groups or religious groups or class? Do you think Smith was an accepting place?

BERSHADSKY: I never had any bad experiences of that, but living in a small house, I heard -- remember this was going back to the mid-70s that there was pressure on black students to move to the bigger houses in the Quad where there were more black students. We had one African-American student who seemed to really love our house, and yet she left after her -- you know, after her freshman year and moved to another house and I heard she was under pressure to move from other students, but I don't know that for certain. Was it an accepting place? I came under pressure from some religious Jewish students to be more religious but I certainly never saw any signs of anti-Semitism.

So most of my -- I grew up in a very rich WASPY town, so being around rich WASPY students was no big change for me. I had a friend -- some friends who were in classes two years ahead of me and they said that they thought there had been snobbiness at Smith and other people in that class said that that might have had to do with a change that had happened recently or just before they came where Smith started to take in more scholarship students, and I visited one of these friends just a few years ago and she was saying how she thought that some of the students here had been kind of snobby and had looked down on her because she was of French Canadian descent and I totally missed that. But she might have been more aware of it than I was.

I did think -- and one of the things that I thought was completely irrational, at least in my year, it seemed as if they had chosen -- selected roommate based on religion, put Jews together, Catholics together and Protestants together, at least as freshman, and I'm not sure that that was the best way of selecting roommates but to the extent we could come up with any answer to the puzzle, that seemed to be the answer that those were their criteria. You know, who was Jewish? And they put Jews together, Protestants together and so that they might be across the hall from each other, like, Jews across from Catholics, down the hall from Protestants, so it wasn't like a segregated house, but yet that was the way the housing department seemed to have chosen people's roommates, and I don't think that seem to have worked out very well, at least from the people I knew. That's one thing that I thought -- it wasn't -- I won't say it wasn't accepting, it just didn't seem to work.

VASQUEZ: And what was the dialogue around feminism on campus during your time here?

BERSHADSKY: We certainly did talk sometimes about things late at night. I was a feminist, still am really a pretty committed feminist. I thought -- that's why I thought I got my education so that people could -- women could be more independent, so -- but I don't think everybody was as feminist about things as I was because I know my best friend from college certainly said that she wanted to meet a nice guy from the Midwest and that's pretty much what she ended up doing. She did get divorced once, but then the second time around, she did exactly that. Met a nice guy from the Midwest which is where she was from and so she used -- she loved Smith. She absolutely loved Smith better than anybody else I knew, but she used it as an opportunity to get a fine education and then go back to Michigan, get a decent job and meet a nice guy and have a nice family, and combine work and family. So that's what she wanted to do. It was not as feminist as I am and quite frankly, to this day she's much more conservative politically than I am. I never really took it as seriously then as I should have, because she would say these things and I thought, oh. But that's really what she meant. She was thrilled to meet Elizabeth Dole and I'm a Democrat, so I hear oh, how many nice Republicans she's met. And we just don't talk about politics anymore.

VASQUEZ: And during this time President Conway was here. Do you remember the buzz about having a first female president and what that was like?

BERSHADSKY: I guess there was excitement. I don't remember that much excitement about it. Thomas Mendenhall was here during my first two years, and then Jill Conway was here during my last two years. One of the things that I remember about Mendenhall, at least during the alumnae graduation weekend -- of course, I wasn't -- he wasn't here when I was graduating was that they placed circus music at some point during the alumnae

ceremonies, so he had a sense of humor, I would say. Jill Conway seemed like a really smart, impressive person. I met her once or twice on the outside, you know, years after I had graduated. I never really got to know her so much. But yeah, I don't think people thought -- I'm not sure how many people were thinking that much about it. My friends for the most part, not that feminist. So I'm not sure that they really gave it that much thought.

VASQUEZ: And so why do you continue to attend -- or is this your first reunion or --

BERSHADSKY: No.

VASQUEZ: So why do you continue to come back to reunion?

BERSHADSKY: Pretty much because my friends are spread out in different parts of the country. That's what comes of going to a more national school like Smith as opposed to going to a state university or a local college. So because my friends are spread out, this gives me the chance to see good friends from different parts of the country. I mean this particular year, one of our friends came out from California, but most of the rest were from the Northeast, from Arlington, Virginia, a good friend from Baltimore, from Connecticut, so we had friends that -- who I could see, but you still have to travel a ways to do that with the exception of my friend from Baltimore.

So I'm getting to see close friends who I don't see all the time, and that makes a big difference usually -- not this year because her son is graduating from Middlebury this weekend, but usually that good friend who is so Republican comes out to reunion weekend and so I get to see her because she lives in Michigan, and I don't see very much of her, you know, during the rest of the five years that we're off. Sometimes, because my parents have been sick in recent years, she's come down to visit my family because she knows my parents so well, but normally I don't see her during -- between reunions. And I've seen her sister who was also a good friend, at reunion, and so sometimes I go to reunion and I see people that I just wouldn't normally be in touch with. I mean the people that I've seen at this reunion for the most part I've been in touch with most of them, but normally I don't see all of these people during the year and so it just gives me a good chance to see old friends. I do some career counseling. So it gives me the chance to do different things.

VASQUEZ: And so do you think having a Smith education affected your life in many ways?

BERSHADSKY: I was a pretty serious student. That's what I went in as and I pretty much came out as that. I went on to Johns Hopkins, so yes, it did. I'm not sure it taught me how to be practical enough. That would have been a good thing for me to have learned, but that might have been the personality I

brought to the education too. So I'm sure that that was a big factor, that I just didn't learn the kind of practical skills I might have learned here.

VASQUEZ: So my last question before I keep you any longer is do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

BERSHADSKY: Enjoy the education and the time here as much as you can. Be happy.

VASQUEZ: Great. Well, thank you so much for your time here.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.