

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Sylvia Perlman, Class of 1966*

Interviewed by  
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 14, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Sylvia Perlman talks about her time in Talbot and Cutter House, Ivy Day traditions, and formal house dinners. A member of *The Sophian* and Hillel, Perlman remembers her time in each community, as well as her work in the Sociology department.

## **Restriction**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Perlman, Sylvia. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sylvia Perlman, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Perlman, Sylvia. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 14 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sylvia Perlman, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project  
Sophia Smith Collection  
Smith College  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2016, with:

SYLVIA PERLMAN  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

COOK: –with your (unclear).

GEIS: OK, ready when you are.

COOK: Great. So, I'm Millie Cook, and I'm conducting an interview with Sylvia Perlman on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank–

GEIS: (laughs) (unclear) continue.

COOK: OK.

GEIS: OK.

COOK: Yeah? Well, thank you for agreeing to do this.

PERLMAN: Well, I won't say, "You're welcome," until — (laughter) until we're done, I guess, but you're welcome.

COOK: So how has Ivy Day been today?

PERLMAN: It's great. I love Ivy Day. It's my — it's just my favorite thing. I mean, it's definitely one of the reasons I come back. It's so cool. It's so much fun, and, you will enjoy it whenever you get to do it, I'm sure.

COOK: OK. So, where did you grow up, and what brought you to Smith?

PERLMAN: I grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, and Smith, I guess, was the — well, I did well on my very mediocre high school, (laughs) and Smith was the only Seven Sisters — or even, I don't know — Seven Sisters school that I knew anybody who'd gone to. There were a number of people, women, from my high sch— girls from my high school who'd come to Smith, and so I'd heard of it, and there was somebody I could come to visit and I did. I stayed overnight and I liked it. So, this is where I came.

COOK: Awesome. And, what did you major in when you—

PERLMAN: Sociology. Honors.

COOK: What — why did you choose sociology?

PERLMAN: Well, I was really interested. (laughs) I'd never studied sociology or psychology before. I was interested in sociology and, quite honestly, it — my impression was that it was a somewhat less challenging major, I guess, and — than say history or political science, which I might have considered, or American studies, but — and I was very intimidated and nervous when I got here. So that's one of — definitely one of the reasons, but, you know, I enjoyed it. I am not at all sorry I — that I majored in sociology.

COOK: Did that nervousness change once you spent time here?

PERLMAN: I guess eventually it did, but it took a while. It definitely took a while. Probably not till junior year, I would guess, did I stop feeling very intimidated and concerned about what courses I took, and ultimately, I did very well. I don't know where you're going with this, (laughs) but I did — I did do very well, but I worked really hard. I studied a lot.

COOK: Yeah. What house were you in?

PERLMAN: I was in Talbot for my first two years and Cutter for my second two years.

COOK: OK. Great. And what were the house communities like there?

PERLMAN: Communities?

COOK: Yeah.

PERLMAN: Well, I liked Cutter a lot better than I liked Talbot. I felt that Talbot was very kind of preppy, and that was not me. And my roommate and I actually moved together. We lived together for the whole four years, and we felt similarly. In fact, we felt that there was some anti-Semitism at Talbot house, and so we were very glad that we moved because we found Cutter much more welcoming.

COOK: Yeah. Was that something that was normal on campus? Did you feel, not — I guess discriminated against is a strong word, but like, was it pertinent on campus?

PERLMAN: I never particularly felt it elsewhere on campus; just at Talbot House, (laughs) actually, so that's why it was a good thing to move.

COOK: Yeah. What was — what are some of your favorite Smith traditions?

PERLMAN: Well, as I said, I love Ivy Day. Well in our day, it was very different. I mean, you know, I'm sure — I assume somebody's mentioned the parietal rules and curfews, and we had to wear skirts to dinner, I think. We had to wear skirts if we were — left campus, like, went to downtown Northampton. We had to wear skirts if we had a faculty appointment, which (laughs) seems so bizarre today that, you know, it's hard to imagine, but it was true. So I don't know. Did I like that tradition? No. (laughs) I guess I liked dinner in the house, everybody together. Formal would be a little strong, but it was, you know. We all — I assume this doesn't happen anymore. The house mother would go to the dining room first, and we couldn't go into the dining room until House Mother went in and probably sat down, and then we could go in and we all sat down at the same time. And I don't think anybody said grace, but, you know, it felt as though it was a formal beginning to a meal, and having faculty over for dinner was nice. I assume people still do that. And that was a nice thing to be able to do. What else? Traditions. Oh, my big sister. I had a — do you still do that?

COOK: Oh yeah.

PERLMAN: Had a big sister whom I'm still in touch with, and, you know—

COOK: That's wonderful.

PERLMAN: Yeah, yeah, it's lovely. I don't know. What other traditions? I mean, I just — I liked the sense of tradition in the school. I just really did. So, whatever other traditions there were, I probably — oh, a tea on whatever, a Friday afternoon or something, yeah. You still do that too?

COOK: Yeah.

PERLMAN: And then during exams — there were a variety of traditions that were kind of fun during exams. So, whatever they were, I basically enjoyed them except the — some of the strict rules. They were a little outdated even by then.

COOK: Yeah. Were you active in any orgs, clubs, or groups?

PERLMAN: Primarily *The Sophian* — I was the headline editor for a year or two — and [Hillel?], and I was the president of Hillel for a year, and I had been, you know, involved in it previously. I don't really remember anything else. Those were the two. As I said, I studied a lot. (laughs)

COOK: Where did you meet your friends?

PERLMAN: Do you mean how did I get to know them? Or do you mean—

COOK: Like, in what—

PERLMAN: Where did we hang out toget—

COOK: —circles did you [get with?] your friends?

PERLMAN: Oh. You know, I don't know. When I loo— it's funny. When I talk to people at reunion, you know, like now or — we had this wonderful book that I don't know if you've seen. You've seen some of them, probably. It's just amazing. And I look and I think, Oh, I know her; I knew her; and I cannot remember, in many cases, how I knew these people — you know, sometimes in class; sometimes, obviously, from my house; sometimes from Hillel; sometimes from *The Sophian*, but not that many people worked on it. I don't know. I don't remember. I'm sorry. (laughs)

COOK: That's OK. What was it like working for *The Sophian*?

PERLMAN: I remember it as being, you know, kind of fun. I had worked on my high school newspaper, and so I enjoyed that kind of thing, and I really enjoyed writing headlines. Actually, for many years, I was very — a big critiquer of headlines. I still occasionally am, but — because it's, you know, it's an interesting challenge to try to get the point across in as few words as possible, and, you know, pick the right type si— I mean, in those days. Now it's easy. You just fool around with the font size, I'm sure. But in those days, you had to really kind of work at it a little harder. So — but it was never a large group of people at any given moment, that, at least not when I was, you know, doing what I was doing, so.

COOK: What were your feelings on President Mendenhall?

PERLMAN: That's an interesting question, because I took what was then called History 1-1 — it's probably 101 or something now — but it was the broad — well, it may not exist anymore because it was truly a western civilization course, which was the thing that most intimidated me. It was really hard for me, and he was my section teacher. So, it was quite an experience. (laughs) And he was — have you ever seen video of him or anything?

COOK: Yeah.

PERLMAN: I mean, he was a very — he was a very nice man, but a very kind of [bluff?], you know, huge and intimidating persona, and when I first — I mean, the first day when I walked in and (laughs) — and he was — and I think I didn't know until I walked in the door that he was the section teacher (laughs) — really not a happy camper because it was very scary

to me. So, but basically, I mean, I liked him. I — you know, in fact, we didn't know of course at the time that he would be the last male president, but — and from our class, I don't remember that there was ever any strong feeling that there should be a female president. I mean, we were kind of before that kind of thing became *au courant*. So, I think people — I mean, I certainly liked him. In fact, any time he would see me for the next three years, he would look at me for a minute and he'd point to me and he'd say, "You were in my history 1-1 section," (laughter) and it was, until the very — the last time he did it was at my, I think, probably, my Phi Beta Kappa initiation. (laughs) And I had had a very scary experience when — I mean, and this is really a major source of my intimidation, and it's a story I never really told anybody until I told a few people this weekend. But in the first exam that year, I got an E+ because I misunderstood a question, and in fact, it was one word that I misunderstood, and I won't say what the word was, but when I've said it to other people and told them what I misinterpreted it for, other people, 50 years later, agree with me. (laughs) But it was a very frightening experience, you know. It happened within what, two months or something of my arriving here, and I wasn't really afraid I was going to flunk out, but it was very scary. So, I recovered, but [knows?]. It was worrying.

COOK: Yeah. So you were at Smith during the peak of the civil rights movement. How aware were you of what was going on?

PERLMAN: Not much. I mean, a little bit, but I can't say I was particularly — paid much attention.

COOK: Part of *The Sophian*?

PERLMAN: I don't remember. I mean, I don't know that a lot of students from Smith went — if they did, I wasn't aware of it — went south, participated in marches or anything. I just — it wasn't something I — I mean, I was, you know, aware of things that were going on, but it wasn't something I was involved in, in any way. Sad to say.

COOK: Was there anyone who was very important to your Smith experience?

PERLMAN: My sociology professors, I guess, primarily, who are either dead or retired. (laughs) I don't know if the name — you know, my thesis advisor was one of them, so.

COOK: What did you do as your thesis?

PERLMAN: I studied the women's rights movement in the nineteenth century, and as I told you before, I used the Sophia Smith Collection, and it was, really was, just a wonderful experience, because any time I found reference to

any book, any magazine, journal, anything, it was right here in Sophia Smith Collection, and it was great.

COOK: That's so great.

PERLMAN: It was great, yeah.

COOK: Did you spend any time on other campuses using the Five College Consortium?

PERLMAN: No. Never did. I wasn't really — there wasn't much need. I mean, I wasn't — one of the things was — I'm sure this is different now — but in those days when you were in the honors program, you took fewer courses. So I only took four courses each semester, junior and senior year, and in senior year, at least, I don't know, several of those were writing the thesis. So I really didn't — junior and senior year, when I might have wanted to take a course on another campus, I wasn't taking enough courses that (laughs) — I could find plenty to do here.

COOK: What was the most significant part of your time at Smith?

PERLMAN: My most significant — so, ask the question again?

COOK: What was the most significant part of your time at Smith?

PERLMAN: Part. Significant part. Hmm. It probably was writing my thesis, I guess, in the sense that, I really enjoyed it a lot, and I subsequently got a PhD, and I enjoyed writing my PhD dissertation, too. So it was, you know, it was something that I kind of could look forward to. Most people don't look forward to writing a PhD dissertation, but I was pretty confident that I would enjoy it, so, and it came from that experience.

COOK: Do you have any favorite memories from when you were here?

PERLMAN: Hm. Well, I have one kind of sad memory. I remember Kennedy was assassinated when we were sophomores, I guess, and so I, you know, I remember that experience. I remember hearing it. I was in the library — I remember where I was — and somebody — and it was — you know, there was no Internet, no nothing except television. So I mean, pretty much everybody gathered in their houses and watched what was going on, on TV. So I remember that. But you asked about positive experiences (laughs) right? That was — what other memories? I mean, I just remember enjoying my time here. I mean, I really liked it when I — I drove here the other day and I parked in the parking garage and walked back alone across campus to Cutter House, where I'm staying, and you know, it was dark and it just reminded me of my time here. It was really very lovely.



COOK: That's very nice. What have you been doing since you graduated from Smith?

PERLMAN: Oh, many things. Let's see. Well, I got married and had kids. I started off going to graduate school in social work and sociology, and quit that program after a year; and worked for several years in a variety of fields: publishing, low-income housing; and then went back to graduate school when I was — I had just had my first child, which actually turned out to be good timing. So I was in graduate school for ten years, including writing my dissertation while my kids were little (laughs), and that worked very well, because my time wasn't quite exactly flexible, but it was — I didn't have to be some place all the time. So — and I worked part-time some of the time when I was in school; and then, I wrote my dissertation on teenage pregnancy, and then I worked in that field for a number of years, and then that kind of dried up as a possibility for me, (laughs) so I looked around for the next thing to do and I ended up working in behavioral health. Not clinic — I'm not a clinician — but doing research administration policy stuff for many years, like, 20-something years. Yeah, so.

COOK: That's great. And do you think Smith has — being a Smith woman has given you a leg up, or it's influenced the way that you've gone at the world?

PERLMAN: Yeah, I do. One of the things I think is that I don't think I would ever have been president of an organization, on a — if I hadn't been at a women's college. So the fact that I was president of Hillel gave me a certain amount of confidence that I could do things that I hadn't done before. And yeah, and I think having it on my resume has — you know, there's a certain kind of prestige to it that I think has made a difference in my life, in terms of a lot of, you know, job applications, graduate school applications, whatever I'd done.

COOK: Great. And just to wrap up, do you have any advice for Smithies and the women that are graduating this year?

PERLMAN: Oh, I would say, as much as you can, do what you love, and you know, try to pursue your — what you really want to do. And you know, I think it's harder now, because I think financial issues, you know — the job market's different, and I mean, in my day, getting a job really wasn't hard, and they weren't great jobs because we — for women, there was a lot of prejudice. That's not the right word, but the women were definitely discriminated against, and I was, when I graduated from here, I was told, I think by the vocational office here, which was what it was called, that I really needed to get some skills — that meant typing and shorthand — and indeed, my first job was as a secretary. After I left graduate school, I worked as a secretary. It was a job I really liked, but I was certainly overqualified for it. (laughs) So — so, you know, I would

say, look around until you really figure out what you want to do, and then do your best to do it.

COOK: Great. Thank you so much.

PERLMAN: You're welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Lisa Rodwell, June 2016.*