

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Barbara Pilvin, Class of 1973

Interviewed by
Carolyn Rees, Class of 2014

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Barbara Pilvin relates memories of Smith professors who made important and lasting impressions on her. She recalls a life-changing year abroad and talks about the importance of reunion and why she has only missed one since her graduation.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Pilvin, Barbara. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Barbara Pilvin, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

BARBARA PILVIN
by: CAROLYN REES

REES: Okay. So this is Carolyn Rees and I'm conducting an interview with Barbara Pilvin on May 25th, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for agreeing to participate and for being here.

So why are you attending reunion this year?

PLIVIN: I always attend reunion. I missed one way at the beginning, my fifth reunion, fifth year. Dawes House had been torn down for no apparent reason, and I really didn't want to see that. And I was busy with other stuff. I was in graduate school, and it just wasn't a good time. So I didn't come and I've come to all the others.

REES: Are a lot of your classmates and friends back this year as well?

PLIVIN: Well, there's always a group that comes, you know, and then there are those who come when circumstances are right. There are a number that I haven't seen in a really long time. One or two who thought they remembered me and screwed up my name, but, you know, people would just sort of come when they can.

And I don't see everybody every time, but there are always those I do see and then there's the crowd that comes for the first time in a lifetime.

REES: So how did you choose to attend Smith?

PLIVIN: Oh, that goes back a ways.

I was doing the college exploration thing, you know, with my family. I had family in Boston. We were living outside New York. And we made a few trips, and I had a very good friend who lived down the block from me who was doing the same thing but she was a year ahead of me.

She ended up a Mount Holyoke. She had all her college catalogs. She had a stack of them. She gave them to me and there was one from Smith. I think I had already seen the campus at that point once just driving through and I thought, gee, this looks really nice.

We were only allowed to apply to four colleges in those days, because it wasn't that easy. Now everything is computerized. It's an awful lot easier. We could apply to four. And if we were not accepted at any of our four choices, then we could apply to others.

I applied to Radcliffe, Brandeis, Bryn Mawr and Smith. Radcliffe rejected me. Several years later when I was applying to graduate school I got back at them. On the little form that asked if you were not attending Harvard, why not, and I wrote, "I'm going to Yale."

And Smith accepted me. And by that time it was mid-April. You know, I had heard so much. I was tired of waiting, and I thought I think I'd really like to be at Smith. And then the letters came. My mother sent -- she sent me to the library. She couldn't stand having me around anymore wondering what was going to happen. And she said, "You go to the library. I will bring the letters." And so I went to the public library, and the letters came and I think I opened this one first. And let's just say that the librarian knew me or else he would have thrown me out of the building for screaming

REES: So what's your reason for coming to Smith?

PLIVIN: This college has and had even that long ago a very, very diverse program. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I knew it would be something in the humanities. I'm certainly no artist. I mean, I write and I sing. But when it comes to painting and sculpting and all of that stuff, forget it, I'm lost.

I had absolutely no interest in science. I didn't think I could understand it too well. It was very intimidating to me. I took the courses I had to take in high school, you know. But I knew that I would get a really good, well-rounded education here.

I was very tempted by some of the junior year broad possibilities. So pretty early on I thought, well, it could be French or it could be history. That way I could go to Paris or Geneva. And I ended up -- I didn't take double comps senior year. My mother died senior year, and I thought, you know, enough is enough. But I ended up with, in effect, a double major in French and history with loads of history courses, more history courses than they required for the major. And an official major in French and spending my junior year in France very happily.

REES: So tell me about your first few days at Smith and what you were feeling or expecting.

PLIVIN: Total shock. I had never been to sleep away camp. Yeah. I have a classmate who's not here right now. But every so often she comes to a reunion and she describes the place as Camp Smith. I remember -- well, my father was in Latin America on a business trip. My mother stayed home with my brother. I flew to

Boston and was met by two of our cousins, and we drove out here. And I remember being very warmly welcomed, especially in Dawes House discovered that I actually had a wooden clothes drying rack. My mother had insisted that I take it. She was very wise. And after that I think at the beginning I was just busy trying to get oriented and thinking what courses to take.

But for I would say the entire first semester my feeling was -- everything was new. Everything was different. It was really great. And then I went home -- I went home for Thanksgiving and then again for Christmas.

Second semester for reasons I will never understand, I started feeling homesick. But at first -- I don't know. I must have been just totally numb. I was busy getting acclimated here. And I actually applied to transfer to John Hopkins and a couple of other places and realized summer before sophomore year that I wanted to come. I did.

REES: And you didn't regret coming back?

PLIVIN: No, no regrets.

REES: No regrets.

PLIVIN: No regrets.

REES: So you mentioned that you took a lot of history classes, probably more than you needed. But what were some of your favorite or most memorable courses and professors?

PLIVIN: Oh, boy, let's see. There was the introductory course that an awful lot of people took. History 100? I don't remember. But one of the lecturers was Thomas Corwin, Mendenhall, President of the College. And he gave lectures on the Napoleonic battles. And I remember sitting as close as I could to the front because the floor was not graduated. And if I didn't sit in the front, I would probably hear okay, but I might have trouble seeing with tall people in front of me. And it was probably a mistake because the lectures of his, as I had been warned, were a crashing bore. I was not interested in military history. I was not interested in Napoleon's battles. And he was drawing them on the blackboard.

Did I mention that he wasn't much of an artist? I'm glad he kept his day job. I never had a problem with him as the College president, but then again what did I know?

Anyhow, I remember reading an awful lot, writing an awful lot, not getting enough sleep. I loved history. I've always loved history. Nobody's ever had to tell me that it's important. I knew it. I grew up with it. I heard stories about life in the old country from my grandparents. I heard stories about life in the earlier

years in the 20th Century and the Depression from my grandparents and my parents. I knew. And in those days history was taught in a very different way from the way it is taught now. I loved it anyway.

Oh, even in sophomore year I had really quite an opportunity. In the fall of 1970, the person who was Dean of what was then Federal City College and is now the University of the District of Columbia was hired I guess as an adjunct professor to come up here from Washington, D.C., two or three times a week to teach the college's Afro American studies course. It was a history course, and I grabbed it because there was an awful that we didn't learn growing up. And I learned a lot. I really, really enjoyed it.

Lots -- oh, my goodness. Senior year I took seminar on the French -- was it the French Revolution? Yes. Heavens. I'm trying to remember exactly what she called it. With Nelly Hoyt, whose background was really, really interesting. It was great. It was really fantastic. And what impressed me more than almost anything else was that one day in February of that year in the middle of class during our break she was called out. She didn't come back. A couple of faculty members came in and started getting her things. And we said, "What's going on?" Nobody said anything. We learned what had happened her husband had been, I guess, driving to work. And I think he had a pacemaker and it has failed and he died at the wheel.

The following week she was back in class. Oh, she was demolished. It was obvious. But she had been working on something that she was writing. She said, "Would you mind if I read something from it?" "Why? Why would we mind?" And she did. And at the end of class -- I was one of the last people out of the room -- she just curled up in the chair and cried.

REES: Wow.

PLIVIN: But she was there. And I thought this lady is amazing. She was half my size and absolutely astonishing, indomitable. That was really memorable.

That's just because she was a wonderful teacher, even though as a young graduate student she was terrified. She thought she'd be a horrible. They had her teach because somebody was out on maternity leave or something. And then she ended up staying. And everybody who took a course with her praised her.

REES: Yeah. That's so amazing. Were there any other professors or mentors that particularly inspired you?

PLIVIN: The entire French department. And there were other people in the history department. And, let's see, digging back through my memory now. I don't really remember too well, although when my classmates start talking about some of their professors, then a lot of things come back. If you interview other people

from my class -- and I'm sure you are -- you're going to get much the same response about different people. I suppose it's still the same way. But when I was here, one of the big drawing cards -- even though nobody said that much about it to me when I was young -- was the kind of relationship that you can develop with faculty members as your mentors, as your friends. And some of those friendships you maintain for life, through thick and thin.

It's unusual I think. And if you're looking for advice on something or, you know, something that happens in your life and you want some guidance, these are people you know and people who know you. And you can ask.

REES: Right.

PLIVIN: That's what friends do for each other. It's nice.

REES: And so you mentioned that you went to Paris for your junior year. Would you talk about that a bit more?

PLIVIN: None stop. You want me out of here at 1:30, right?

REES: Yes. So what was that like for you?

PLIVIN: Wow. The best year of my life. Downhill ever since. This is going on record.

I had spent a tiny little bit of time in Canada for Expo '67 and traveling around with my family. I had been out west in this country. I had never lived abroad. I had never lived in -- what at that point was still very much a foreign language to me.

My French was very good. When I went over to France, I was quite proficient. When I came back, I was fluent. And I was very, very lucky to be in a program like this one, even though some people said it was too sheltered because we were with people who knew the country, knew the language, knew their way around the system, had help from Smith College. You know, it was really a big help.

We started out with six weeks in Aix-en-Provence where I loved to love pizza. Pizza, the right way: Garlic, olives, just the right proportion of everything, not too much cheese, nice crust. And these small pizzas would make a really good lunch for one person.

I had a roommate who was a friend from Smith. I have never seen her at a reunion. I'm not going to give her name. She knows who she is. And we had a really good bunch of people in the group that were mostly French majors; some artistry, history, at least one music major. And it was 1971-72. And the big national strike of '68 I guess, which the French referred to as *laissez en mo* (phonetic) was very fresh in their minds. I mean, they have a much longer

historical memory than we do. And they were just starting to allow foreign students back into their classes. So, you know, we took some -- mostly we took courses that were taught by French university professors for us at Reid Hall. I remember taking a course at the Calais de France (phonetic) **19:46:53 with **Jean ***, who was France's best known medievalist, but I didn't know that. He never mentioned it. And he was the most modest man in the world. And we started with the six weeks in taking some courses, but the focus was on really getting acclimated to life in a different culture.

And then after that in Paris, and I was with a family. Very, very interesting. Oh, papa taught with the Collette, Latin and Greek at the _____. And he had a wild sense of humor. Totally wild. He knew we were going to be intimidated when we first saw him. And so did mamó.

So we got there, and we were ready for lunch. I mean, we were really, really on our best behavior, you know. And she came in. He wasn't in yet. But they obviously had this down to a -- this was a big act. And we had been told that they daughters our age. And so I said that in French. I said, "Understand you have daughters our age," and she looked at me with those big, brown puppy dog eyes and she said, "Lesquels? J'ai six. (Which ones. I have six)." That shut me up. And then he came out in his smoking jacket, you know, and he's pretending -- oh, my God.

We were like that, you know. And then at the end of lunch we wanted to go out for a walk, and he said, "Okay. I'll let you out this way." (*Speaks in French*) **19:48:18. And he opened the door to his study or something, and we go, "Okay." It was wonderful, the whole year. There were some problems. We were very, very lucky. Jo Ott (phonetic) was our advisor. And there was one time one student's parents were killed in a car accident. She had to come back home in a big hurry. And in the spring of that year my mother was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer, which in 1972 was a death sentence. And I learned that a little bit. I didn't learn the whole story until I got back home in June. But I got back from spring break in Rome, in Brittany**19:49:12. And that evening -- once I had told the family as much as I knew, because I had been talking transatlantic with my folks, the oldest daughter had tickets to the ballet and she offered them to me. She thought it would be good for me. I didn't want to go anywhere, so she took the tickets. I just wanted to stay in.

REES: Right.

PLIVIN: Academically, well, much of the academic process over there was just simply living in another culture, living in another language. Absorption, immersion. Yeah, we had courses. We worked hard. But the amount of classroom stuff in France was not quite as overwhelming as it is here. But just the whole process was, you know -- I mean, I remember details I cannot believe. And that was -- you know, that was more than 40 years ago. And the oldest grandchild of the

family that I lived with has become a famous writer or book critic, whatever. His mother says he devours books; he swallows books. (*Speaks in French*). His name is (*in French*) **. And I haven't seen him since he was seven. But I was back there some years ago, and I saw his mother. And she called him and she said, "Do you remember her?" Of course he remembered me.

REES: Wow.

PLIVIN: Yeah.

REES: That's great. So you have stayed in touch with them.

PLIVIN: Well -- and they're not very good writing. They did say that. And it's kind of hard because -- I mean, I could write to them in French. That wouldn't be a problem, if I could get their email addresses. And **19:51:03 (*in French*) is pretty well known at this point, so I'd be very surprised if he had an email address that was public. But I remember him as an almost four-year-old who was still not completely toilet trained. Now he's in his mid-40s.

I had an extraordinary experience there. I think there were other people in my classes whose experience was a little bit different. But a lot of it is luck. If you are with a family that's perfect for you -- some people were not with families. I knew there people who felt that I was somewhat singled out because the faculty knew me and I knew them. But, okay, if I make a little bit of an effort to get to know the department here and somebody else doesn't, you know --

REES: Right.

PLIVIN: -- obviously I will get more out of it. And I got a big deal out of it.

REES: That's great.

Can you speak a bit to whatever it's like to come from Paris and how the experience influenced the rest of your Smith career, especially given your mother was --

PLIVIN: Coming back. Yeah, it took a while to readjust. I mean, I came back in June. And the first thing that seemed odd to me was the way I sounded in English. I didn't sound like myself. I had hardly spoken English at all that year.

It was very hard that year in a number of ways because I had to spend the first semester doing a lot of traveling here, home, here, home, DC, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

I did not want to leave the campus at the end of the year. You know, my friends were here. Most people were leaving anyway. They had plans. They knew what

they were going to be doing. It seemed to me that they had planned out their whole lives and they didn't have to worry about it. I didn't have a job lined up. I wasn't planning on going to graduate school, at least not right away; mainly because I was exhausted. And I was really quite unsettled about it. I went home because there I had no place to go. But I came back here often.

REES: So what have you been up to since Smith?

PLIVIN: Since Smith.

REES: Tell us about your trajectory, your life has taken.

PLIVIN: Well, as I said, I knew I would do something with what I learned here, something in the humanities. And I had a feeling that there would be something involving French, certainly something involving history. Well, I had been a librarian for a long time. My background is in history, special collections, rare books, humanities, and I do a lot of genealogy now at work. It's hot stuff, but that's not why I do it. I do it because I love it and I think it's important way in many cases of introducing people to history in a personal way, because that's what makes it worth something. Any subject, if you make it personal, then people are going to get interested in it.

I also discovered to my amazement after a certain amount of time passed and I discovered I had a few interesting medical problems, that when you started doing some research and looking for information, I could actually understand medical concepts, and they're fascinating. Did I get any of that here? Oh, probably some of by it osmosis. I didn't take much by way of science. As I said, I was terrified. Chemistry scared the dickens out of me.

Now, my life depends on it. And when your life depends on something, you can get over fear very fast. Did being at Smith College have much to do with that, I don't know. Maybe. Probably the fact that I chose to come here had something to do with the fact that I actually did have some ability to learn things I didn't think I could.

And I've also discovered that one of the best parts of my job is teaching, and that's something I always thought I would hate and I thought I'd be terrible at it. Every teacher here, everyone I ever knew said, "You'd love it and you'd be wonderful at it," and I started doing it at the library, because if you work with the public, it's what you do, and it's really the best part of the job. And I'm very good at it and I love it.

REES: That's great.

PLIVIN: And I hope to do more of the same kind of thing after I retire.

REES: That's great. Where do you work?

PLIVIN: I work at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

REES: That's nice.

PLIVIN: Uh-huh.

REES: So we only have a couple of minutes left. So we'll wrap up. But do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

PLIVIN: Current Smithies I would say -- well, I think teaching is done differently now from when I was here. But I would say if you are a little bit afraid of doing something, try going beyond your comfort level. Try one semester of something. Talk to your friends. Get some information first. You don't have to jump in the deep end, but, you know, you can get in and start swimming a little bit. The worst that will happen is that you won't get an A. If you have any notion of studying abroad, do it. Do it if you can. It's really quite a great experience. It opens your mind. It really changes you in ways you don't really understand at the time.

Future Smithies? Well, come up and visit and get to know people. And if you take an interest in a particular subject, try and make contact with someone who's interested in that subject here, maybe someone who's majoring in it, maybe someone who can kind of shepherd you around a little bit.

REES: Okay. Well, thank you, Barbara, for coming in today.

PLIVIN: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.