

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Araxi Prévot, Class of 1946

Interviewed by
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 21, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Araxi Prévot discusses being at Smith during World War II, working on the community farms, her experiences living in Cushing House and the French House, attending a summer session at Smith, her life after Smith, and what a Smith education has meant to her.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Prévot, Araxi. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Araxi Prévot, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Prévot, Araxi. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Araxi Prévot, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

ARAXI PRÉVOT

by: SARAH DUNN

DUNN: This is Sarah Dunn, and I'm conducting an interview with — oh my goodness, I lost your paper for a second. I'm sorry.

PRÉVOT: Well, thank you for looking.

DUNN: Araxi? Prévot?

DUNN: We're going to try this again (laughs). This is Sarah Dunn. I'm conducting an interview — (inaudible) look at your name (laughs) — with Araxi Prévot on May 20th, 2011 for Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this. Would you mind retelling again how you got to Smith College?

PRÉVOT: I'm sorry?

DUNN: Would you mind retelling again how you arrived at Smith College?

PRÉVOT: How I happened to get to Smith College?

DUNN: Yes.

PRÉVOT: Oh, I was in — I had spent two and a half years in high school, Great Neck, Long Island, to come in and look (inaudible) here, and my high school English teacher was a Smith graduate, and recommended Smith to me, and I applied, and was able [to get in], but I knew nothing about the college. When they asked me to write an essay, I believe, about why I wanted to come to Smith College, I think I said something like, I had heard that it was a good place for me to be able to transfer back to England when I went back to England. Because I, at that time, I was only here because of the war, and always thought I was going to go back (inaudible), but never did.

DUNN: Never did?

PRÉVOT: No. Not to stay, anyway.

DUNN: Not to stay, yeah. What was the community like here? What was the atmosphere like on campus when you arrived?

PRÉVOT: I can't describe it, it was just, you know, something different for me. I came sight unseen, arrived on the train with my baggage, and all the people got off the train at Northampton. We got a taxi, I believe, to take us to the campus, which I'd never been before. So [it was something?]. Entirely new experience.

DUNN: What house did you live in while you were here?

PRÉVOT: I came to Cushing.

DUNN: Cushing?

PRÉVOT: Cushing, yeah. I was in Cushing my freshman year, and then first summer session, we stayed in — Cushing stayed open, so we stayed. There were some 40, 45, 48 of us in our class. We all stayed in Cushing. And then during that summer, I met a girl who was in — she was ahead of me, and she was in French House, and through her encouragement, I transferred to French House. And then, second summer, we stayed, we were all in Comstock, everybody in our class. We were (inaudible) in Comstock House. And then at French House when (inaudible). So I didn't have a senior year, really, because I wasn't a senior, so to speak, with the Class of '45, [with which I graduated?].

DUNN: Yeah.

PRÉVOT: And my class [were?] juniors at that time.

DUNN: You were at school year during a really different period of time, with World War II happening.

PRÉVOT: Yes. It was different, I think, up to a time that we came here, there was service in the dorms, there were maids, there were people who used to be waited on (laughs) and when we came, we — I think I was probably more comfortable the way it became. We did our own housecleaning, we helped in the kitchen, helped the cooks in the kitchen, and were really part of doing the — it was almost like a (inaudible). So it — in that respect, I think it was more comfortable than it would have been if we'd been waited on, so.

DUNN: And you went out into the community, and you worked, volunteered in the community?

PRÉVOT: No. Didn't work in the community.

DUNN: I mean on the farms.

PRÉVOT: Oh. Oh, yes. And I don't think the farm work started until the summer session.

DUNN: OK.

PRÉVOT: Summer session, we were told they needed workers on the farm, and (inaudible) come up. I can't remember how many times a week it would be, I know Tuesdays were one of them. But I can't remember if we went several times a week, or (background noise). But I remember before starting, I went out and bought myself my first pair of blue jeans ever at the Army/Navy store, and I remember also, some days, it was really, really hot, and we'd come back all sweaty and dirty from the farm, and if it started to rain, we'd go out into the quad and let the rain just rain on us with our muddy blue jeans. (laughs)

DUNN: (laughs) Nice way to shower.

PRÉVOT: (laughs) But it was interesting also, because the president of the college, Herb Davis, came with us a couple of times and farmed with us, and I know some people have said that he was cold, and (inaudible) I didn't find him so ever. He was very, very warm and friendly. (inaudible)

DUNN: Do you think we're getting audio? (multiple conversations; inaudible). Worrying about everybody else I want to hear. Want to be able to hear (inaudible). Did you think that Smith was a pretty accepting place for you?

PRÉVOT: Yeah, well, I was — because everywhere I had ever been, I was always somewhat of an outsider. I grew up in England as a foreigner, and a foreign name, foreign foreigner. And then I came over, it was just [the kind of thing?] still, when I was in school for Switzerland for a few months before — [at the beginning?] before I came over here, and, you know, the foreigner bit. I came to this country and (multiple conversations; inaudible) I felt (multiple conversations; inaudible) a foreigner, so. I was always somewhat (multiple conversations; inaudible), but I was very impressed by the people who were — like the president of our class, and I was very, very impressed by her. I never felt part of the leadership (laughs). It was — I think it took a while to get adjusted in that way, but we had a nice group of people, (inaudible) freshmen [like me?] in Cushing House, and I made some friends, and then I met Liz. Liz Wilson, who was one of the English children who lived at (inaudible) House, and we became very good friends, because we had the English background together, and as a result of knowing her, I got to wait on tables at the president's house when they had receptions for people. I got to know Mrs. (inaudible), who was often a guest there, and this was a very, very nice experience for me. (inaudible). After

freshman year, Liz went back home. Her dad was an exchange professor here. He came over and she went back. It was pretty interesting. But he worked very closely with Esther Cloudman Dunn, and co-taught her Shakespeare class with her. And I remember one of my exams I got back my blue book with a B, which I thought was pretty good, and well done, Araxi, and signed by F.P. Wilson (laughs). It was just — that was an exciting experience for me. I don't know what else to say. Yeah.

DUNN: Were there any issues with religion, class, or race — religion, class, race? Was that any sort of controversy on campus at that time?

PRÉVOT: At that — no, we were very impressed that Jane White was elected president of student council, I think that's what she was—

DUNN: (inaudible) representatives.

PRÉVOT: —whatever her title was, and I was very impressed by her as a person anyway. And in fact, I was impressed by anybody who was a class officer or any kind of — had any kind of office. They were all somewhat, you know, higher up. And I didn't know any of them personally, but I (inaudible) very impressed by them.

DUNN: Yeah. Were you involved with any student organizations on campus, or—

PRÉVOT: When I was in summer school, first year in summer school, I got to know somebody from the class ahead very well, and she was very active in the student government, and she later became chairman of one of the judicial board or something like that, I can't remember which it was. But she was the one who encouraged me to go live in French House, and she was also a very good friend, because my brother had died that summer, and she was very helpful to me. I was going through a difficult period at that time. Then I moved to French House. It was very, very small, and much more intimate than Cushing had been. Cushing we were very friendly with our little group of freshmen, but in French House, we were all sort of a big family, and speaking French — it was relatively easy for me to get into French House, because they were happy to have somebody who could speak French. It helped the others who were less versed in speaking French, and as I said before, we — I used to help the cook in the kitchen, that was one of my favorite jobs. Spent a lot of time in the kitchen with her. And we had a wonderful, wonderful house mother. Madame [Hettie Clooney?]. Was very, very impressive person. And we also had a great house faculty resident for the first period of time that I was there, Mademoiselle [Salenne?], but she got ill, and she was replaced by somebody else, so we were very sad to lose her. She had to drop out. She was one of the

(inaudible) professors from the French faculty. But she got (inaudible). I don't know what she had, or why, but she had to drop out.

DUNN: Yeah. Were there any other professors on campus that were really important to you?

PRÉVOT: Yeah, well, I had as a freshman, in freshman English, I had an Englishwoman named Jean Mitchell, who happened to be our faculty resident in Cushing House, and later she became president of Bard College, but she was a great freshman English teacher. We were really — I was impressed by her, and then later on, I also had Esther Cloudman Dunn for Latin and translation. She was a wonderful, wonderful teacher, (inaudible) I sometimes went and had coffee with her on Green Street. And Esther Cloudman Dunn was a great teacher, and she was the one that my friend Liz's father taught with, co-taught with, F.P. Wilson, taught with, in her Shakespeare class. Oh, there were other. There were — oh, a wonderful art teacher. Priscilla Paine Van der Poel. She was a great art — she had had — I had her for freshman — Art 1-1, and she was a person who was really concerned about the students. She was very warm. Very warm. And there were a number of faculty members who I found very, very warm and friendly. I mean, Priscilla Van der Poel was one of the closest. Later on, when I was in my last year, I had [Barry Arminchase?] whom I'd always been very impressed by. And I had him for "The Bible in Translation." [The Bible?] (inaudible), that was it. I'm confusing two things. Esther — [Ellen Ledeket?] had "Latin in Translation," that was the class I had with her, but (inaudible) had "The Bible as Literature."

DUNN: Oh, I see.

PRÉVOT: She got ill right before — right before the end of the term, and we were — we'd just made it to our final exam. I don't know how those final exams got corrected, because she was ill. She's (inaudible) illness, and I don't know how long — how much longer she taught at Smith, because she was quite elderly at the time, and I really don't know that — she was a very dramatic person. (inaudible). There were other professors that I had a — after my freshman year with Priscilla Van der Poel in the art department, I had Mr. Johnson, I can't remember what his first name was, he was a sculptor, and I learned sculpting with him (laughs) and made a sculpture. And I think it was partly therapy for me, the sculpture of my brother and younger sister, who had both died in recent years. And it's — I think that that was very helpful to me during the summer that I had him as a sculpture teacher.

DUNN: So you attended classes here through the summer?

PRÉVOT: Excuse me?

- DUNN: So you attended classes here through the summer as well—
- PRÉVOT: Yes, that's what I said.
- DUNN: —as the school year?
- PRÉVOT: Yeah. I was there. I was in Cushing one summer and Comstock the other summer, yes.
- DUNN: Was that a normal occurrence, or did things — did a lot of students stay through the summer at that time?
- PRÉVOT: There were 45 to 40 — I counted them as 45 or 48 of us in our class that came right straight through the summer, and that meant — that gave us a year, so we graduated a year ahead of our class.
- DUNN: OK. OK. That's great.
- PRÉVOT: So we missed our senior year (inaudible).
- DUNN: Yeah, [that's a?] — yeah.
- PRÉVOT: So, but that first summer was [really?] very hard for me, because I had to go home when my brother died for his funeral, and I came back and I was (inaudible). It was a very — it was an emotional time, and that was when I met this girl that was a year ahead of me who took me under her wing, got me into French House, and so on. So it was a different experience. That summer, also, I had an economics class with Mr. [Orton?], and that was not my favorite subject, but I wrote a paper for him on which he gave me an A, and I was so pleased, because I knew my final exam would not come out very well (laughing) so it balanced out somehow. Enabled me to pass the course, so (laughter).
- DUNN: What kind of expectations did you feel coming to leaving Smith?
- PRÉVOT: Excuse me?
- DUNN: What kind of expectations did you feel leaving Smith in '46, [as 'round?] in work and family and—
- PRÉVOT: I don't know. When I was getting through almost to the end of Smith, I had no idea what I was going to do. There weren't that many possibilities open [to us?] at that time, but my roommate at that time, my roommate's mother came to visit, she was a Smith girl, with her Smith roommate, who was the headmistress of a school in Stamford, Connecticut, and she needed a teacher, and a very inexpensive teacher who didn't have any experience or any training (laughter), and she drafted me, so I went to teach in Stamford, Connecticut in a small private

school, and learned to teach by teaching, I guess (laughs). But I really didn't, you know, I hadn't had any teacher [training?] (inaudible). I'd taken the class on child psychology, that was about the closest I came to anything to do with teaching.

DUNN: What has a Smith education meant for you?

PRÉVOT: What has—

DUNN: What has a Smith education meant for you?

PRÉVOT: Well, I think it enabled me to get jobs quite — teaching (inaudible) quite easily. (laughter) After my teaching experience in Stanford, Connecticut — I only stayed there two years — but the headmistress that hired me suggested that I go to Middlebury for [some?] school to get my degree in French. And the combination of having been to Smith and having a Master's in French eventually, I think would help me in my education, and help me in my teaching career afterwards.

DUNN: Wonderful. Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies? Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

PRÉVOT: (inaudible) For future Smithies?

DUNN: Yeah.

PRÉVOT: I don't know what I would give in advice except to study (laughs).

DUNN: (laughs) To study.

PRÉVOT: [Try to?] study and get as good grades as possible, and get as much out of life at Smith — there are so many things now offered that you have, this generation has, that we didn't have. So many more possibilities. I think take advantage of it. The trouble is when you — when I was here, aside from the fact that we helped work in the kitchen and did some farming and so forth, I felt that I had to keep my nose to the grindstone all the time, study, study, study, study. There were a lot of activities that I would have loved to [have been?] involved with, but I didn't think I could possibly make it and get my work done as well. So I don't know. I don't know that I would be able to give advice to students. But I feel that they should take advantage as much as they can of the other things offered other than just class. I think I lost out in not being involved (inaudible). I would like to have been in a drama group. I would like to have been amongst the people who put on the shows, like the [rally?] show, but I never volunteered for anything like that, because I didn't think I'd have time to practice. I wouldn't have had time to get my papers done (inaudible) (laughs). (inaudible)

- DUNN: Some of us still feel that way (laughs).
- PRÉVOT: Yes.
- DUNN: Very much so. Yes.
- PRÉVOT: Yes. It's very, very difficult. You have to be able to juggle so many things, and keep your grades up. I was a slow reader. I buried myself in the library with a book that I had to read, and fall asleep on the [couch?] (laughter). And I was always late with my papers. Always. Every paper I had to write, I'd be rushing it in the morning it was due (laughs). And we (inaudible) — well, I think most of us, in my time, wrote everything longhand. Very few people had typewriters. There was no computers in those days. So our poor professors had to bear with reading our handwriting (laughter).
- DUNN: Did you use inkwells? Ink and inkwells, too, right? Yeah.
- PRÉVOT: Also, I think very important, at the beginning, to get good advice [over the course?] of [school?], hopefully. With another stiff professor. Oh, oh, and history. History. History 1-1. [History?], our professor did that, (inaudible) train us, too, and as a result of not taking History 1-1, and what was the other one I said? Anyway, those two were basic requirements for you to — so I ended up — was never able to take any further history courses. I was never able to take, you know — I was limited in what I could take, because I didn't have the right prerequisite freshman year. So I audited other courses, but when you audit, you can't — and also, being under pressure, you don't have time to do all the work you need to do, so. You make contact with other teachers. I made contact with [Hans Kahn?], I made contact with Mrs. Kafka, who was a wonderful history teacher. But you don't really get the most out of the course when you're auditing.
- DUNN: Well, thank you very much. It was wonderful to talk to you more.
- PRÉVOT: I'm not very good at —
- DUNN: You're not very good at what?
- PRÉVOT: Oh, I don't know. Talking (laughs).
- DUNN: No, you're great, you're great (laughter). No, it was wonderful to hear more, I really wanted to connect more, because I'm impressed that you came to Smith without ever seeing it, without ever setting foot.
- PRÉVOT: And not knowing what I was going to do.
- DUNN: Yeah, yeah.

PRÉVOT: But—

DUNN: Here you are (laughs).

PRÉVOT: So I continued teaching.

DUNN: Yes.

PRÉVOT: I continued teaching (inaudible) until '81. Then I stopped.

DUNN: Yeah.

PRÉVOT: But I taught in — after Connecticut, I taught in Pennsylvania, and then I went to France with the Middlebury group, the first Middlebury group that went to France after the war.

DUNN: Yeah.

PRÉVOT: And finished my work on my Master's, but again, I felt so much pressure to get my work done for my courses that I was taking that I didn't have time to do the things that people like to do when they're in France, I had some very good friends who were in the group with me, and we did a little traveling together. I'd say I couldn't do this, and I couldn't do that, because I had to do work for my classes. When they all went home, I stayed on, and I got some part-time jobs just to eke out my — [with?] my father supported me the official year that I was there, I got subsidy from my father, but after that I was on my own, so (laughs). And then I got a substitute job at the American School in Paris for a while when somebody quit before the end of the year, so I finished up the year for him, and after that I got married (laughs). Married to a French student that I knew because he was in the same course as one of my friend's roommates. And then I taught at the international school. Right after we were married, we went to be counselors at an American camp in France, a camp for American students, only they didn't say it was for American students, they said it was for French war orphans. But what it really was was that the mothers were kitchen help in the camp, and the children were in the camp, but with their mothers working, and most of the kids were American. And from there, we went to the international school (inaudible) [for a year?]. And then my husband went into my family business in London, so — much against what I thought he really wanted to do. He survived it for [a time?]. He quit a teaching job at Easter time, and I went with him to London, and went back and finished the year in Geneva, then went to live in England with him in my grandfather's flat in London, and our first child was born in England in January of that year. And then he quit the family business (laughs) so. So my grandfather came and lived with me in his flat, and I stayed there for 18 months till my first child was old enough

to — so that I could leave her during the day, so I went back to France, and went back to teaching at the American school in Paris, and eked out a living, barely, living in a hotel room with my little one, paying a babysitter to take care of her during the day, and I decided after the year I had to go back to the States where I could earn a proper living. I went back at that point, and my husband was doing his military service and finishing his degree (inaudible). He joined us later, '57. When I went back to the States, I was teaching at — I got a job teaching in Andover, Mass., for a couple of years. Three years. And then later, various other jobs. My husband joined us in '57, but he didn't stay. He was back and forth sometimes there, and sometimes not. But eventually we divorced, but in the meantime, I had two more kids, so (laughs).

DUNN: Thank you so much.

PRÉVOT: Anyway, I went on teaching until I retired.

DUNN: Thank you so much for telling us all your story.

PRÉVOT: Oh, I'm sorry, I just — I don't think it's — I don't think I'm a very good person to do things orally. I write much better than I talk.

DUNN: Oh, it's—

PRÉVOT: But now I can't even write, because I can't see what I'm writing (laughter).

DUNN: Oh, it's OK. It's OK. (audio cuts)

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed, July 2011.