

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Ruth Rosenberg, Class of 1976*

Interviewed by  
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 14, 2016

## **Abstract**

In her interview, Ruth Rosenberg remembers her time in Wilson House, working as house vice president, and Smith's social life. Rosenberg also talks about the transition from President Thomas Mendenhall to President Jill Kirk Conway, and student activism around the Vietnam War.

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

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Rosenberg, Ruth. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ruth Rosenberg, 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:

RUTH ROSENBERG  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

GEIS: Okay. Ready, on your mark.

COOK: Great. So, I am Millie Cook, and I am conducting an interview with Ruth on May 14, 2016, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for being a part of this.

ROSENBERG: Oh, you're welcome.

COOK: So, how's your day been, so far? How was reunion and Ivy Day for you?

ROSENBERG: It's been really good. It's been a little surreal, because in some ways, I see people, and I feel like I just saw them, and I was just here, but there's been a lot of life since I saw many of these people. So — and it feels like a long time. So, but it's been — it's been very fun.

COOK: Yeah.

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

COOK: So, what brought you to Smith? Why were you — where did you grow up, and what brought you to this college?

ROSENBERG: So I grew up in London, England, and came here for high school. So I'd only been in the country four years, by the time I got to Smith. But we went on a college tour, and I [said?] absolutely, I did not want to go to a girls' school, because I'd been to one in England, and said no. And my parents said, No, you — we're going to take you, and just walk around. So, (laughs) we drove up, and I was, kind of pissy mood. And we got out, and I was just — I just walked around, and said, "This is where I want to be." And everybody was interesting and friendly, and the library was wonderful. And the whole place just — so, I applied early decision. And they — at that point, I think you had to — I think the [tiny word?] was — I can't remember when the tiny word was, but anyway, they — my mother called up, because it was my birthday close to the time. And

they let her know that she could tell me that I got in for my birthday. So, it was really wonderful.

COOK: That's great. What did you major in, when you were here?

ROSENBERG: I majored in government. And didn't take any science classes at all. Took pre-calc — a friend of mine, [Diane Helens?], and I took pre-calc senior year, because we thought we should have some math before we graduated. (laughs) So, and I really enjoyed going. It was amazing. I took a lot of classes with Walter Morris-Hale, and still remember him in great detail, and learnt so much from him. Donna Divine was my advisor. And there's many courses that I just remember vividly. The teaching here is amazing. And I — the only thing that I screwed up was, I decided I was going to take Russian my freshman year. And who — I can't remember the person who taught it, but she was really scary. Because I thought she was going to hit me with a ruler all the time, and I was really, really bad at it. So, it was a year course, and they wouldn't let me drop it.

COOK: Oh.

ROSENBERG: So I failed for a semester, and then they let me not continue. So that was the only bad — (laughs) really bad thing that happened academically here. Yeah.

COOK: So what house did you live in?

ROSENBERG: Martha Wilson.

COOK: And what was the community like, in Wilson?

ROSENBERG: Oh, it was great. All the freshmen lived on the fourth floor. We were the last year when you had — there we no men allowed on — above the first floor. And there was a house mother, though I can't — none of us can remember her. But we know there was a house mother. And you had to sign up and do duty at the incoming booth, and people had to sign in and out. We did all that, but we sneaked men in, and — it was a great community. I think it was — I am still friends with three people from freshman year; we see each other every year.

COOK: Wow.

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

COOK: That's so nice.

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

- COOK: So, did you always feel comfortable in your house, on campus, at Smith?
- ROSENBERG: No. I think, socially, it was — I loved being at a women's college. I — it did amazing things for me. Socially, and dating, it was very hard. And a shy person, and so, going to mixers, and doing those kinds of things was excruciating. The Amherst frat scene was disgusting. And I think we even went up to Dartmouth, and it was — it — so that whole piece of it was very difficult for me. I dated a man from Yale, the last semester of my freshman year, and he, unfortunately, fell out of a window, that — at the end of that semester.
- COOK: Oh my God.
- ROSENBERG: And so that also did me in. Yeah. He was a great guy, from Australia.
- COOK: Wow.
- ROSENBERG: So I'd finally found somebody that I felt comfortable with (laughs) — yeah. It was dreadful. So my sophomore was really hard.
- And I don't know, we all — I think we all were — we didn't have it — any of the support that there is now. I mean, it would have been so great, if we had, because I think we were all struggling with all kinds of things. I was very homesick. I think our expectations of what we were supposed to be doing here, and what we were, and struggled with all of that stuff, but we struggled together, with no outside help. So, there's pros and cons to that.
- COOK: So it really fostered a sense of community—
- ROSENBERG: Yes.
- COOK: —in a way?
- ROSENBERG: Yes. We — people were very supportive of each other, I would say. But there was a lot of things that didn't really get worked out, for me, till later, I would say. And I want — I always wonder if there was the kind of counseling that they have now, whether that would have been really a better thing. Yeah.
- COOK: (unclear)
- ROSENBERG: Yeah. We all shared — there were like 15 of us sharing one phone, and — yeah. (laughs)
- COOK: So, was there a stereotypical Smithy, at your time? And what would she be like?

ROSENBERG: I think there was, but I think, when we — for us, it was all changing a lot. So for me, a stereotypical Smithy was very preppy, and you know, wore cable-knit sweaters, and tweed skirts, and had a very Anglo-Saxon kind of look. But there were beginning to be — so I'm Jewish. So there were more Jewish people here. There were people coming here who didn't have money. But it was all — I'd say the people who were on scholarship hid it, or tried to. They were — I know. I've talked about this with my friends, who were. And they were — there was quite a bit of shame around that. Because you weren't in that kind of what you were supposed to look like. But none of us owned a dress. We all wore jeans. We were that generation that had — were rebelling greatly against that stereotype.

COOK: Yeah.

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

COOK: Was it like a very feminist—

ROSENBERG: Yes. It was the — so, we were here when Bobby — when Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in tennis. We were remembering that we broke into the Martha Wilson bell tower and rang the bell. (laughter) And, yes. I mean, the whole place went crazy. Went crazy. Yes.

So, the — it was the Vietnam War, and all the demonstrating against the Vietnam War, when I — when I was a senior in high school. I came from New Haven, and they were — so when Bobby Riggs was on trial. So there were tanks on the New Haven Green. So we brought all of that stuff here.

And it was interesting, because we had President Mendenhall, who was very grandfatherly, and we loved him. And when Jill Kirk Conway came, instead of being, Wow, here's a woman who's going to be — we were very worried that she was going to change things about Smith that we loved. So there was this kind of weird dichotomy, between us being rebellious, and wanting to change things, but having this grandfather as president, and not really wanting this woman to come in and do things differently. So that was — yeah, it was a very interesting time.

COOK: What kind of political things were going on on campus?

ROSENBERG: My friend Diane, once again, we had a strike for lettuce, to support lettuce growers in California. So we wouldn't eat lettuce in the dining rooms. We — what else did we do? I can't remember. That's the one that — oh, we had a grape boycott also. There were a lot of boycotts.

We saw ourselves as pretty rebellious. I'm not sure how rebellious actually were. Those are the two things that strike me the most. Yeah.

COOK: Yeah. So kind of like you were talking about earlier, Smith was starting to accept more non-white women in the '70s. Do you feel like the campus was a diverse place, or — or at least growing?

ROSENBERG: No. Oh, no.

COOK: Really?

ROSENBERG: No. And I was so struck last night, because I work in a university. I was so struck last night what a white crowd we, as a class, are. Oh, it was just — I don't remember the last time I was in such a white group of people. So no. It wasn't diverse. I think it was beginning to be more diverse, in terms of class, maybe? But not — nothing much — there was a girl from Calcutta in the class below us. But that was — you know, and then there were a smattering of black students, but that was really it, yeah. No. We hadn't got there. At all.

COOK: Yeah. So, were you active in any orgs, or groups on campus?

ROSENBERG: So I was vice president of the house. So did house government kinds of things. Now, it's one of the regrets — I can't remember if I did anything else here. I think I did, but I don't remember what it was. One of my big regrets here is that I was not more active on campus, and I didn't do — I really regret that I didn't do crew. I think it would have really changed a lot of the way I felt — interact socially, as well as other things. Yeah. So, no, I didn't. I was active in the house organization. Yeah.

COOK: Where did you meet your friends, then, if not in—

ROSENBERG: Oh, in the house.

COOK: In the house?

ROSENBERG: Yes. Those were mostly my friends. I didn't — yeah. I mean, I think that changing the dining rooms is a really good idea. I mean, I miss — I think it was wonderful to be able to have your own dining room. It's one of the things that made me feel safe and cozy here. But it was harder to meet people outside. Yes.

Oh, I did Model United Nations. That's what I did.

COOK: Oh!

ROSENBERG: Yeah. (laughs) Yes. That's what I did.

COOK: Do you have any favorite Smith traditions?

ROSENBERG: Mountain Day is my very, very favorite. I'm trying to get them to do it where I work. (laughs) I think it's such a wonderful idea that everything just stops, especially these days, where everybody's just going flat out. Yeah.

COOK: Yeah. What was your favorite place on campus?

ROSENBERG: Interesting. I think the library. (pause) I'm trying to think where I hung out. At the library, and in Martha Wilson. The botan— the greenhouse. I like the greenhouse a lot, yeah.

COOK: Yeah, it's (unclear).

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

COOK: Did you meet people from other colleges, or use the five-college consortium?

ROSENBERG: I did. I took a class at Amherst — took a couple of classes at Amherst, which was really interesting. (laughs)

COOK: Yeah?

ROSENBERG: This place really — what they say about being women in a class, and being able to speak up, and feeling comfortable is all true. It has been — it's stood me in good stead my entire life. And going — I took classes at Amherst — I think I took one at Hampshire, too. But Amherst, I just remember, my picture of the class at Amherst was there was a guy there, wearing suspenders. And he'd tip back in his chair and pull on his suspenders, and just talk, and not let anybody have a word in edgewise. And that's kind of my image of (laughs) how it was then. Yeah.

COOK: So not much has changed. (laughter)

ROSENBERG: (laughter) Now it's co-ed. That's really interesting. Yeah.

COOK: Yeah.

ROSENBERG: No. That's one of the things I valued here, is you'd have amazing conversations everywhere.

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

ROSENBERG: My friends. And I really felt like I had come to a place where there were people who — my people were here. I'd always felt like such an outsider, in high school. It was a very difficult transition, immigrating, and coming to an American high school, and nobody quite got me, and here there were all these women, people, professors, too, who just — I



felt really comfortable with, and could be myself. Yeah. And it was — that was such a gift. So, yeah.

COOK: Did you go abroad junior year?

ROSENBERG: I didn't, because I just—

COOK: Because you had—

ROSENBERG: I'd just been abroad. (laughter) So, no, I stayed here junior year. And that was hard, because a lot of my friends did go abroad. So it was hard, and it was great, because we — it was a much tighter, more intimate class. So that's the year that I did, in fact, meet more people outside Wilson. Yeah. So, it kind of pushed me out there.

COOK: Do you have a favorite memory of your college years?

ROSENBERG: I have a couple. I remember freshman year, all the seniors sang a Supremes song to us. And somebody was talking about it this morning, and now I can't remember which song it was, but they did this whole Supremes thing. It was a kind of a welcome to the freshmen. It was great. I just got lots of kind of snapshots of those kinds of things. Of, you know, somebody broke up with their boyfriend sophomore year, and played Van Morrison non-stop for months. (laughter) We were so sick of Van Morrison. We — I and a friend moved into the bell tower rooms in Martha Wilson, and it was kind of — we opened it up, and everybody could come in. Walter Morris-Hale. I just — I have such a picture of him, lecturing. It's so vivid. (sighs)

What else? Sitting on the floor, in the evenings, people drinking Tab, smoking, and just talking. Yeah. We had a — we spent a lot of time just talking. Yeah. Which was great. And it wasn't the big occasions; it wasn't like graduation, and — I mean, those were all great, but it was the small, the small memories.

COOK: Yeah.

ROSENBERG: Yeah. Yeah. I can't remember any others. Hm.

COOK: So what have you been doing since you graduated?

ROSENBERG: All kinds of things. I've lived many places. I went from here to Washington, DC, and I worked as a paralegal. And then I decided I wanted to live in Israel, so I went out and lived on a kibbutz for six months, and met my husband there. And then we moved — I had applied to law school, so I went to law school. And he moved from California, to Connecticut. I went to the University of Connecticut; it was my state school. It was so cheap. And then, he went and got a

degree at MIT, a Master's degree at MIT, so we moved to Cambridge for a bit. And I finished at BU, and then we moved to Texas.

COOK: Oh, wow.

ROSENBERG: And we were there for three very long years. And I had a son at MIT, and a daughter in Texas. And then we moved to Cleveland. And we were there for 15 years, which was great. And so, when we moved to Cleveland, I became a divorce mediator. I never practiced law. It wasn't for me. But I became a divorce mediator, and then I worked for a community mediation center, and ran their family mediation program, where we did separation and divorce for people who made too much money for legal aid, and not enough to hire a lawyer.

And worked — did that, and did all kinds of other community mediation type things. Prison. We did training for people coming out of prison. We did community kind of mediation. I did all kinds of different kinds of mediation. And then, I did that for a while. What did I do? Oh, and then I wanted to see how non-profits should be run, so I got a certificate in non-profit management. And then we moved to — we decided — my son graduated high school, and my daughter — it was just when they introduced testing in Ohio, and she has a learning disability. And we'd wanted to move east, so we decided we would move east, and we moved to Providence, Rhode Island. He was a consultant, at the time. And could — just needed an airport, and we had friends there. So we picked up and moved to Providence. And I walked into the HR department at Brown University, and I got a job as Special Assistant to the Dean of Biology and Medicine. I kind of just took a totally left turn. And was Special Assistant to the Dean for three deans, over five years. And then left, with the last dean.

And my daughter went off to college, and my husband left me. He was — he had a major midlife crisis, and decided he didn't want to be married anymore. So, that was a very hard time. So, I had kind of two crazy people in my life; my boss, and my husband. (laughs) So I left my boss, and my husband left me.

I kind of picked myself up. I worked for the local community mediation center, doing training, and then I got a job at MIT, running the student mediation program there. And I did that for five years. And while I was at MIT, I met ombudsmen for the first time, and thought, This is what I want to do when I grow up. So, you know, I'm this far into my career, and I finally — because for me, it combined the kind of one-on-one conflict resolution, to helping people navigate their lives, with the things that I'd loved in the Dean's office, which was being able to see the systemic issues. Yeah, so Brown, who I'd thought needed an ombuds for a long time, put a call out — put a job thing for an ombuds, and I applied, and I've been there for four years now.

COOK: Nice.

ROSENBERG: Yeah.

COOK: Very cool.

ROSENBERG: So, yeah. And I have a grandchild, who's 11 months now. And both my kids live in Seattle.

COOK: So just looking at the time.

ROSENBERG: Yup.

COOK: One more: do you have any advice for Smithies, and the Smithies that are graduating this year?

ROSENBERG: Give yourselves a break, and take time to mess around trying things out. I went to law school, because my dad kept saying, "Go to law school, go to law school. You need to know what you're doing. You need a plan." And I finally succumbed, because I really didn't know what I wanted to do, and I am sorry that I didn't mess around, and try different things out, and maybe it hadn't worked out, and then tried different things. Because I think, where I ended up is good. But I always wonder what would have happened if I'd not been so goal-oriented. Yeah. So, that's the advice I would give.

COOK: Thank you so much.

ROSENBERG: Oh, you're welcome. Thank you.

COOK: Great.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 21, 2016.*