

Sarah Lawrence Magazine

Gerry Albarelli '80



Here are some of the things that people tell me when I ask them about Gerda Lerner: she was “combative”; “unpleasant”; “I have nothing but negative memories”; “what I love about her is tied up with what I don’t like, isn’t that interesting?”

They also say:

“She did important foundational work.”

“She was brilliant.”

“She paid the price for coming first.”

Here is what she said about herself: “I was a laughingstock because I insisted that women had a history. They all said, ‘You have a brilliant academic career ahead of you—abandon this outlandish idea.’” She refused.

An official statement: “Dr. Gerda Lerner, who established and served as founding director of the Sarah Lawrence College graduate program in women’s history—the first graduate

program of its kind— died at the age of 92 on January 2, 2013.”

Here are some unofficial stories behind this official story.

The Women’s History Program was launched in 1972. Even though the historian Joan Kelly was there from the beginning, serving as its co-director, for many the program was synonymous with Gerda Lerner:

“I came to study with Gerda,” says Pam Elam MA ’80. “The fact that she was at Sarah Lawrence was fine with me. If she had been somewhere else, I would have gone somewhere else.” Lerner, she says, deserves full credit for turning history’s attention in the direction of women—all women, not just the leaders. Lerner made history recognize the ordinary woman as important, not just part of the backdrop.

“Sarah Lawrence has never properly acknowledged her,” Elam says. “Gerda had to fight like hell for that program!”

A new approach, especially when it raises questions about power—who has it, who does not—is bound to be met with resistance.

Eva Kollisch (German/literature faculty emerita) taught at Sarah Lawrence from 1963 to 1993. “I remember when I first met her. Her office was right next door to mine. I sensed right away a powerful personality. I heard her Austrian accent—we had that in common. Before I knew it, she said to me: ‘Eva, why aren’t you teaching women writers in your courses?’ I said, ‘Well, I do now and then—Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton ...’ the subject, the subject! What women write about!’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘that isn’t an approach that I practice.’ She said, ‘Well, you should try it—there’s a whole world there.’

“She began to educate us very quickly. She was on a kind of mission: she wanted to pull women out of the web of history.”

Kollisch tells me that Lerner asked similar questions of other faculty members, especially the history faculty: Why don’t you talk about women? The answer seemed obvious: Women are not in the limelight. They are not in the leadership. They’re not visible. Exactly! That’s the problem.

A new approach, especially when it raises questions about power—who has it, who does not—is bound to be met with resistance.

Women's history was welcomed by some; opposed, dismissed, trivialized by others.

Carole Artigiani MA '79: "When I told people I was studying women's history, I would hear—usually from the men—'Women's history? Well, that should take all of five minutes.'"

Some of the faculty thought it was "lightweight. Women? Special interest." They thought that Lerner was "not on the level they imagined themselves to be," Kollisch says.

Author Phyllis Vine, who taught in the program, remembers the "antipathy that greeted women's history." Scholarship was supposed to be dispassionate, Vine says, neutral. Political values had no place in the classroom. As an extension of feminism, women's history was "not only political, but toxic."

But some on the faculty were starting to challenge the idea that their political opinions should be kept out of the discussion; the war in Vietnam had called so much into question.

"It was an exciting time," Vine says. "It was a time of fervor and optimism. Your politics was your life, your life was your politics."

Lerner was part of this energetic moment: a serious scholar who challenged authority and refused to remain neutral.

Her own history—a refugee from Nazi Austria, former member of the Communist Party (her husband, who was also a party member, had been blacklisted)—must have had something to do with this refusal.

Lerner—"blunt and loud," "strident," "out of place on this genteel campus"—went about making enemies and a few friends, and seeking out allies (after her own fashion):

Ilja Wachs, who has been teaching literature at the College since 1965, remembers Lerner "pounding on my door one day—'Ilja, I don't understand! We have the same political viewpoint. We come from the same background. Why are we not friends!' I looked at her and said—in horror—'Gerda, you remind me of my mother!' She threw up her hands and walked away. She did in fact remind me of my mother in her lack of a sense of boundary between herself and other people." He adds: "I think it was this very absence of a sense of boundaries that allowed her to do creative things. To create a program—to create something new—you have to be willing to breach boundaries."

Creating something new meant finding the money to keep the new thing going. This put

Lerner in direct conflict with Charles DeCarlo, the president of the College at the time. Gerda was always “stomping across campus” or “storming into Charles’ office.” She would show up with evidence of the tuition revenue the Women’s History Program had generated. DeCarlo was not impressed.

Wachs laughs and says: “Charles disliked feminism. He used to make a speech and raise a toast to manhood just to tease the feminists. That was the atmosphere in which Gerda established her program.”

Lerner’s response, Vine says, “was to become more confrontational, more defiant: ‘Oh, so you think women’s history is nothing? I’ll show you!’ She made sure to bring important people to the campus who would help her prove otherwise.”

This might be where Alice Kessler-Harris, a professor of American history at Columbia University, enters the story. “One day, it must have been ’72 or ’73,” she says, “out of the clear blue, Gerda called up: Did I want to be a historian of women? She knew I had just signed a contract for a book. ‘Well, that’s what I’m doing,’ I told her. ‘I’m doing women’s labor history.’ She said, ‘Well, you’re never going to be a historian of women unless you come work with me at Sarah Lawrence.’ So what did I do? I took a leave from Hofstra and I went to work for her at Sarah Lawrence. I knew Gerda ... I knew what I was getting myself into.”

In the meantime, the Women’s History Program was evolving.

Kessler-Harris: “Amy Swerdlow MA ’73 was a first-rate organizer who had gone through the program and had been hired to stay on. She created a course, ‘Women Organizing Women.’”

Gerda’s original vision of the program was “as a straightforward path to doctoral work.” The new emphasis on the program as a hive of organizing activity began to give it “its unique stamp.”

(Swerdlow, who passed away in 2012, and Lerner were honored at the 15th Annual Women’s History Conference at SLC in March.)

Women leaders, policymakers, labor leaders, politicians, and community organizers began to show up for seminars and for the program’s annual summer institutes.

Molly Murphy MacGregor, executive director and co-founder of the National Women’s History Project, remembers the Summer Institute of 1979.

“I got there and right away set up a meeting with Gerda Lerner to talk about my idea to create something called national women’s history week. And if you think this wasn’t one of the scariest moments of my life—Gerda was brilliant! I had heard her speak in the opening session, and here I was, this graduate school dropout. Well, I don’t know what I was so afraid of because Gerda’s passion was women’s history.

“What came out of the conference is that that February I got a call at work from the White House— I answered the phone; I remember it was lunchtime— ‘Yes, it’s the White House calling for Molly Murphy MacGregor.’ I said, ‘Oh, one moment please.’ And I put the call on hold because, you know, I hadn’t had the White House call before. I got back on the line and it was Sarah Weddington calling for President Carter. She was calling to say that President Carter was going to sign a proclamation establishing National Women’s History Week.” That’s the kind of thing Gerda could make happen—she had gathered together for that summer institute some powerful women, women who were highly placed, political insiders—maybe one or two who even knew the president.

In that presidential proclamation, Carter quoted Lerner: “Women’s history is women’s right.” Even, or especially within, the program, Lerner was “difficult.” She insisted on punctuality but wasn’t always herself punctual. She “was always right,” “was extremely protective of the program she had created.” She also had a habit of taking credit for ideas that she had at first “hotly opposed.”

But in the end, it probably didn’t matter. What mattered was that she was the vessel capable of carrying this history, she was built to fight to sustain it, she knew how to make others care about it.

“She was always consistent on one thing—she believed in women’s history,” says Kessler-Harris. “She believed in the power of women’s history to change the world.”

The passion and scope of her mission is there for anyone to see in the title of one of her early books: *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History*.

She was the vessel capable of carrying this history, she was built to fight to sustain it, she knew how to make others care about it.

“Gerda was tough on students.” She “wouldn’t suffer fools.” Students were always “leaving

Gerda's office in tears." "She could make you feel one inch tall." But she "also took an interest in your entire life." "She gave me advice," says Carole Artigiani. "I remember that she sat me down one day and said, 'You must be an autonomous woman!'" Reynolds Tenazas-Norman '78: "Gerda Lerner changed my entire way of thinking about the past! And that changed my life!"

Writer Angela Wilson '78:

"I remember I walked into a women's bookstore in Denver, where I was from. I was a teenager. I came across a copy of *Black Women in White America*. It had a picture on the cover of a black woman with a massive Afro silhouetted against an American flag. I immediately bought the book. I didn't know anyone wrote about black women. The book was by Gerda Lerner. I naturally assumed Gerda Lerner was a black woman because I didn't think anybody else valued black women's experiences. I read the book and I decided I had to go to Sarah Lawrence to study with Gerda Lerner."

At a certain point the stories all start to sound the same. "She was amazing and wonderful!" "The only good thing I can say about her is her enormous sense of entitlement probably had something to do with the fact that she could get things done!" "She was a genius!" "Forbidding! Oppressive!" "She was a bully!" "I admired her because she was a bully!" "By the way," someone writes, "I forgot to say: she had absolutely no sense of humor."

There's more to say—there's something in between the opposite poles—but I'm not sure I'll ever hear it. And then I have a conversation with Elizabeth Minnich '65, who directed the Center for Continuing Education from 1972 to 1973:

"I really didn't have any direct experience of the difficult side of Gerda. We met at the Center for Continuing Education at Sarah Lawrence—she walked in and plopped herself down to tell me about some activist women she was bringing to campus, and you know when you meet someone and you know right away you're going to be friends. I didn't have the problems that people have talked about. Maybe it's because I was in philosophy and not in history.

"Gerda was very European, you know. We would talk for hours. She loved poetry—she would read poetry aloud to me at night when I would visit her or she would visit me. She was someone who was really quite wise; I'm not sure if most people know this.

"She did have a sense of humor. I remember when she came back from this gathering of the

next generation of feminist scholars and said, ‘Oh Elizabeth, you’d think nobody had ever gone through menopause. You’d think they’d invented it.’

“To create something new, you have to be willing to breach boundaries.”

“I remember on one of those trips I made to see her in Madison. Now, I have skied twice in my life— and there was Gerda, she had decided we should—and it was God knows how much below zero—she had decided we had done enough talking indoors, we should go outside and do something. She said, ‘I borrowed you some skis. We’ll ski cross-country.’ She was born on skis; I wasn’t born on skis. Well, we went out and I loved it. But then I realized, I hadn’t noticed, we’d been going uphill and all of a sudden there’s this incredibly steep hill going down—it’s iced over—I’m perched at the top of this hill looking down. Gerda disappears down the hill and I’m thinking, I’m going to die! I thought okay the one thing I know is you lean forward not back and you hold your poles back and you try to keep your knees from crossing over one another, and I go whooshing down. But I survived. I came up to Gerda and she said, ‘Well, that took you a while!’ And she takes off. And I’m just thinking: Don’t you understand? I’m still alive.

“The last time I saw her: she had been unable to get up for the most part, she had to have at least a cane to walk or to hold onto me or both, and so for the first several days of the visit I was allowed to be the one who was in the kitchen and fixed our meals and brought them to her. Usually she cooked or she told me what to do; this time she couldn’t do that. She was having trouble eating, her mouth was terribly dry. I was at the kitchen sink preparing the meal, slicing carrots maybe. She looked at what I was doing, literally bumped me out of the way, and said, ‘No, that’s not how you do it!’ That’s when I thought: Oh, she’s back.

“One way in which I miss her? I think it must be most of all that we would have these very regular phone conversations in which we talked about our lives, the most intense and important relationships with people in our lives. I think that was the most important part.”

She goes on remembering. One story leads to the next, complicating the picture.

And this is exactly as it should be because this is exactly how Gerda Lerner used stories.

She dug up old, neglected stories of women. She knew their value right away. She insisted against great odds that these stories be heard—she saw their troublemaking potential. She knew that they would lead the majority, as she put it, to find its past. Having discovered its

past, the majority could now reconsider its future.

Gerry Albarelli '80 has been teaching writing at SLC since 2004. He is on the faculty of the Columbia University Oral History Master of Arts program and is an interview for the Columbia Center for Oral History. He is the author of *Teacha! Stories from a Yeshiva* (Glad Day, 2001) and co-author of two guides to oral history interviewing.

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Fight Like Hell

Oral historian Gerry Albarelli '10 (writing) revisits the tumultuous early days of the women's history program at Sarah Lawrence.



The Next Big Thing

The digital revolution. Social media. *The Lion King*. Charlie Fink '81 knows how to exploit a cultural moment. Exhibits A, B, and C: his many careers.



Unlikely Landscape

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A written tribute to former Sarah Lawrence College Literature faculty member, Wolfgang Spitzer.



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Short piece adapted from "Two Opinions" in *Fools* by Joan Silber (writing).

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