
IN MEMORIAM:

DR. SYDEL SILVERMAN

by Jane Schneider

Sydel Silverman Wolf was a distinguished anthropologist who became a chronicler of and influential advocate for the discipline of anthropology. With a Master's Degree in Human Development from the University of Chicago (1957) and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Columbia University (1963), she began her teaching career at Queens College of the City University of New York. An enthusiastic and energetic leader, she chaired the anthropology department at Queens from 1970 to 1973, then moved to become the Executive Officer of the PhD Program in Anthropology at CUNY, holding that position until 1986. From 1987 until 1999, she was President of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. There she directed the Foundation's renowned conference program, dedicated to exploring new frontiers of research in spectacular surroundings throughout the world, and leading to many landmark publications. She continued, and reinforced, Wenner-Gren's crucial role in funding the field research of graduate students and young scholars. Because of her initiative, anthropologists can now archive their field notes for use by future scholars at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. She further galvanized Wenner-Gren's support of the Pan African Association of Anthropologists and EASA – the European



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Association of Social Anthropologists. On March 25th, at age 85, Sydel Silverman (her professional name) died of cancer.

Dr. Silverman, a prolific and superb writer, was an ethnographer and historian of anthropology. In books, edited collections, and conference papers, she probed what it meant to engage in collective field studies, exemplified by the “Puerto Rico Project” of the late 1940s, and assembled distinguished professors to reflect on being taught by anthropology’s shaping figures. The book that resulted from the latter, *Totems and Teachers*, presents nine case studies; Dr. Silverman insisted that Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, two women shaping figures, be among them. Another book, called *The Beast on the Table*, took up “conferencing with anthropologists” -- a candid reflection on the conferences that Wenner-Gren sponsored, and that produced substantial anthropological knowledge, during Dr. Silverman’s tenure. Her presidency coincided with the intense debates among anthropologists set off by the “postmodern turn” of the 1980s, which questioned the authority of science. Always committed to an anthropology that embraced all humans – anywhere and anytime – Sydel Silverman championed the unity of the discipline’s “four fields” – archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. An especially telling chapter of *The Beast on the Table* is the one that describes biological anthropologists at a 1996 conference, grappling with science, gender, and wider societal concerns. Blessed with ethnographic sensibility, Dr. Silverman also describes how Wenner-Gren’s famous and generous meals and wine helped render such fraught debates productive.

Several Silverman essays trace the history of the Wenner-Gren Foundation, its companion journal, *Current Anthropology*, and the history of the graduate program in anthropology at CUNY. Regarding CUNY, she reconstructs the 1973-74 fiscal crisis of New York City, which caused the University to imagine eliminating so-called “non-essential” disciplines, one of which was anthropology. A leader of the charge against this plan, Silverman mobilized Margaret Mead to declare in various public fora that anthropology was “essential;” it not only survived but thrived under Silverman’s leadership at CUNY.

Apart from being an anthropologist for anthropology, Dr. Silverman is known as an ethnographer of Montecastello di Vibio, a hilltop town in Umbria. Introduced to Italy and France by her first husband, the artist Mel Silverman, whom she met when they were high school students in Chicago, the two settled in Montecastello, he to make paintings and collages of local artisans and townscapes; she, having begun her doctoral studies at Columbia, to study landlord-peasant, and town-country, relationships. Her book, *Three Bells of Civilization; Life in an Italian Hill Town*, and several articles cited to this day, challenge stereotypes of Italian rural society. She subsequently studied, and wrote about, the Palio – Sienna’s annual horse race and festival. Translated into Italian, *Three Bells* was celebrated, together with Mel’s art, in Montecastello, in 2015. Sadly, two decades earlier, in 1966, Mel

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Silverman died of cancer, leaving Sydel alone with two small daughters, Eve and Julie. Sydel often noted that when she was pregnant with Julie, Queens College, where she was a beginning teacher, had a rule that pregnancies were incompatible with continued employment. Luckily, her then chair, Ernestine Friedl, “covered for her” so she would not lose her faculty position.)

Sydel Silverman was known for saying she had two “extraordinary men” as husbands. The second was Eric R. Wolf, a well-known anthropologist at the University of Michigan, whom she married in 1972. That Wolf would move to New York, accepting positions at Lehman College and the Graduate Center, led some, especially at Michigan, to suspect that Dr. Silverman had used her considerable charms to enhance the anthropology program at CUNY. Eric also died of cancer, in 1999. They had traveled together on every continent, a quest for experiencing different human possibilities that Sydel continued after Eric’s death. In her second widowhood, she also returned to a childhood passion, playing the flute.

Sydel Silverman was the youngest of seven siblings, born to Josef and Leah Finfer who met in the US after immigrating from Vilna (Vilnius), Lithuania. Growing up in Chicago, she was surrounded by Jewish culture and Yiddish humor. Her father was a rabbi, scholar, and teacher while her mother, with remarkable cleverness, cooked and made clothes for a growing household. Two of her brothers became architects. But Sydel, the last born, was considered the smartest; indeed, she was a radio “Quiz Kid” in 1945. She will be remembered for her extraordinary wit, her intellectual brilliance, and for what she has accomplished as an anthropologist and for anthropology. She leaves two daughters, Eve Silverman, married to Gene Scaperotta, of Wilton, CT and Julie Silverman Yorn, formerly married to Kevin Yorn, of Los Angeles; a stepson, Daniel Wolf, also of Los Angeles; five grandchildren, Alexander and Elizabeth Scaperotta, Samantha Yorn, and Nathaniel and Jennifer Wolf; as well as two great grandchildren, Matias and Lucia Wolf.

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