

2017

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Recommended Citation

Yanoshak, Nancy, "Nancy Yanoshak" (2017). *Simon's Rock Institutional Oral History Project*. 21.
http://digitalcommons.bard.edu/sr-oral_hist/21

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Simon's Rock Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Nancy (Nance) Yanoshak**
Faculty in History and Women's Studies (1982 - 2015)

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Dates: **November 24, 2015 and December 14, 2015**

Location: **Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, MA**

Collection: **Simon's Rock College Archives**

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Interview with Nancy Yanoshak

November 24, 2015

Bard College at Simon's Rock, Great Barrington, Massachusetts

Selected excerpts from the Oral History Project interview. The full transcript may be restricted. To request access please contact the [Simon's Rock College Archives](#).

Keywords: Betty Hall, Elizabeth Blodgett Hall, Livy Hall, Livingston Hall, Center for Early College Pedagogy, Educating Outside The Lines, shooting, Ñacuñan Saez, pedagogy, seminar, advising, history, solstice parties, Ian Bickford, Leon Botstein, Bard

“I always, until I became part-time, had a full quota of advisees, I've gotten along well with all of them to my knowledge. I remember with freshman, sometimes it's like-- they have to come to that meeting, sometimes it's like pulling teeth [to get them to say anything.] I have a whole bunch of questions, I ask “How are you doing? Do you wear shoes? Do you like your roommate? Do you like the dining hall food?” so we get in a good spot. And I think when people trust you, they open up. And I think I'm lucky that most of my advisees have trusted me and come to me with their problems.”

“I fell in love [with Simon's Rock.] I never really seriously thought of applying to somewhere else. I had applied to several other places that year, but after that first year-- I had to learn how to teach-- I think, maybe, some of us are more gifted in that area, but I don't think any of us are born anything. I think you learn how to teach here, and often students tell you, you don't know how to teach when you first come here. [...] I stayed because I had the opportunity to work with colleagues who were so creative, and I had the opportunity to be creative myself. The only thing I really had to teach was a history course once in awhile, although I created a program. And to do the seminars. But I was pretty free to make up courses that I thought were interesting, pretty free to respond to students' interests. So that's something that you don't get at larger institutions. And I didn't produce as much as a scholar as I would have elsewhere, because I always thought it's a labor-intensive place to be here, and you really need to give your all to your students. And I did some scholarly work, of course-- I couldn't have better colleagues, a better atmosphere, or more interested kids. They just blew me away.”

“We had to do a presentation to the faculty, to Mary [Marcy, Provost] and Sam [Ruhmkorff, faculty in philosophy], who was the dean back then. And so my opening line was ‘Let's write a book together.’ And it grew from there. There were some questions-- could we possibly do this? Did we have enough to say about teaching? And it turned out that we did. As a Russian medievalist, I had written articles on watermarks as a way to date manuscripts and 16th century anti-heretical polemics. Then I branched out and I analyzed film in 1920s Russia, but I never

thought I would write about pedagogy, for God's sake! What a boring topic! [...] These were collaborations, you don't see collaborations like this outside of grad school, even if you see them there. To have a professor and students, age sixteen, seventeen, writing an article for a book. That's one of the things I thought-- I was most proud of in this book. It wasn't just us faculty members pontificating, but we really had our students telling us what it was like."

"I was originally very shy. I'm not shy now. I wish I had been a Simon's Rock student, when I see what it does for our students. But I see what it did for me, to be in positions of responsibility that early in my career. That wouldn't have happened at any other place, that I would be department head in my second year here. [...] I felt that I was serving my colleagues, giving back to them. After five or six years, I wasn't shy anymore, I've always been rather-- I'm not an overbearing type of person. I don't speak a lot, I try to say something meaningful when I do. But I'm not the loudest person around, so this was a way to contribute."

"I'd like to be remembered as someone who was very dedicated to the college and to my students, who would go the extra mile for them and my colleagues. And I'd like to be remembered as someone who told good Soviet jokes! Who had high standards and nurtured people along in what they did-- I would rather be gentle with people than not. 'She told a good joke, and she taught me how to be a scholar.'"

"When I first came, Betty Hall was still driving around on her little golf cart-- I think I used some images, memories, of that to introduce the book, in fact, because I do remember she did stop students and say 'What do you think of things? What's going on? How are things going?' And so I did get to meet her a couple of times. One of my strongest memories-- it was my first week here-- she threw a party at her house, where Ba Win, I guess, still lives [Onward House]. And I walked up to her and I said 'Hi, I'm Nance, I'm the new historian.' And she said 'Hi, I'm Betty, I founded the college.' So I really didn't know who she was. But she took it in stride and she knew she was being cute. And certainly not unkind. What ambition she had, to turn this into what it's become in almost 50 years."

"And I knew Livy [Hall], again, not very well, but he took two Russian history courses from me. He was retired and quite venerable. I was wondering a little how it would go with sixteen year olds and an eighty year old. He was never-- he talked once in awhile, contributed where it was appropriate, never dominated anything or said anything that would have intimidated anyone, including me. So after a while, I felt perfectly comfortable. He was a good Russian history student. I'm very grateful for them."

"My friend Barbara [Resnik] called me about it late at night, maybe around ten or something, and she said 'Something's happened up at the school. It involves Ñacuñan' [Saez], who was the

faculty member who was killed. She came to my house and we went to Joan [DelPlato]'s house. Wendy [Shifrin] was there also. We were sort of-- a group-- and spent much of the night just getting information. I remember I called Ba Win, he gave me a little bit of information. And I just-- we didn't sleep all that night. I think Barbara and I shared a couch. But Ñacuñan was a good friend. He was a marvelous teacher. Very creative-- one reason I learned about Foucault was that he loved Foucault, and I wanted to feel closer to him or to somehow connect with him. We lost a great one there."

"A big debate in early Soviet society in the 1920s was 'can you build socialism in Russia?' Because they had a revolution in the wrong place at the wrong time, was the context. And Marx said you had to be there, industrially. And Russia, while it had some industrialization, really didn't. So the Bolsheviks took power earlier than they should have, theoretically. The debate among the Bolshevik leadership was 'can you build socialism in Russia?' Can you build it in Russia alone, do you have to have revolutions in the advanced countries? So that's the context. Lenin and Trotsky-- no, sorry, Stalin and Trotsky, after Lenin died were big rivals for power. And they never agreed on everything. So they were debating one day in the Politburo, is it possible to build socialism in Russia? And they could not decide. So they took their question to the chief rabbi in Moscow. They let him out of his cell. And they said, 'Rabbi, we have a problem, we need your counsel, we need your advice. Is it possible to build socialism in Russia?' And the rabbi said, [deep voice] 'Well, gentlemen, that's a very complicated question. I need to think about it. I need to consult with my colleagues, come back in a week and you'll have your answer.' So they came back in a week, to the prison again. And they said 'We're going to put it to you again, Rabbi. Is it possible to build socialism in Russia?' And the rabbi said 'Yes, it's possible to build socialism in Russia, but while you're building socialism in Russia, it's better to be somewhere else.'"

"You ever heard of collectivization? The Soviet state took over small private farms to create state controlled farms and it was brutally and quickly done by Stalin and his henchmen. And it caused a famine and many, many deaths. So it happened one time that the members of the Politburo were attacked by lice and they tried every remedy they could get. Nothing was working, until, let's say Bakharin, that's my favorite Bolshevik. Bakharin came up with a remedy, he said 'I have the answer about how to get rid of the lice. Take one third and deport them. Take one third and shoot them. And the last third you collectivize.' This isn't very funny. They love this in Russian history."