

Memorial Minute

Lilo Stern 1930-1994

Lilo Stern, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Vassar from 1968-1991, died in June of complications following pneumonia. Lilo's strongest legacy is the many, many students she taught to think and to write and whom she kept in touch with over the years. Years after students graduated, they would come back to tell her that she had made a real difference in their lives.

Lilo cared deeply about scholarship and her students, from whom she demanded high performance without compromise. She couldn't abide slackers but would go all out for those who were willing to work. She was, by preference and, perhaps, by her training at Cambridge, a tutor more than a lecturer, but those of us who invited her to lecture found those lectures well-organized and riveting. She was constantly aware of new currents in her field and spent the summer of 1986 at a Summer Film Workshop at Harvard so that her film course at Vassar would be informed by the best and latest scholarship.

Lilo was born in Germany, from which she was uprooted in 1938 as the Holocaust spread its shadow over Europe. Her father, a hat manufacturer, fled with his family to England, where 8 year old Lilo and her older sister had to bridge the gulf between German and English cultures. As she grew, the

conflict between a determinedly German home and an equally demanding English school system made her an anthropologist and a permanent rebel. Her German parents instilled in her a passion for duty, obligation and perfection; the English provided a Socialist's outrage at injustice and a determination to defend the rights of the underdog. Together, they engendered in Lilo a permanent cross-cultural perspective.

After secondary school, Lilo entered the Clothing Industry training first in Paris then in London. Beginning as a cutter, she became a pattern-grader, pattern-cutter, designer and finally manageress of a small workroom. Deciding she wanted to teach, Lilo entered the London School of Economics to study anthropology. She became the star of her class and all stood in awe of her. Her doctoral research was done in Chiapas, Mexico, where she discovered the comfort of long skirts with pockets. At that time, particularly in Mexico, she was told that women couldn't do this, or couldn't do that and certainly couldn't go out at night. Lilo would have nothing to do with this, but didn't discourage the rumor that circulated that the big notebook she carried in her pocket was a gun. Lilo received her PhD from Cambridge University in November 1966. She came to the US to teach at Bryn Mawr for the 1967-68 year, moving to Vassar the following year.

Lilo's parents were convinced that the Nazi's would follow them to England. Lilo lived with a life-long sense of imminent disaster. She expected life to be hard, and when it failed to meet her expectations, she would undertake something to correct life's inadequate performance. Thus, in 1987-88, she took a year's leave from Vassar to teach English as a Foreign Language in Xi'an, China. In her letters, she detailed the difficulties of her living situation, but focussed on how much harder life was for her students:

I live here in a special Guest House for Foreign teachers. The Guest House was built three years ago and looks like a sleazy, third class motel in the States. The bathroom tiles come out when I scrub them, the lamps are falling to pieces and are held together by wire and string, the carpet is torn and coming up and the drapes are filthy with half the hooks off.

But this is the lap of luxury compared to my students and colleagues. Undergraduate students live eight to a room, graduates live four to a room and the young teachers have the privilege of sharing with two. Many young couples have to wait four to eight years before they get a single room together, and an apartment (if you can call it that) means a wait of 10-15 years. Even the apartments are merely two bare concrete rooms, most without kitchen - which is

communal, and without toilet which is also communal. Only the most senior people get an apartment with kitchen and what passes for a bathroom. All these rooms and apartments have no heat when the temperature goes down to 25-30 F. in winter; no hot water and poor, intermittent electricity which is turned off about every two weeks for some reason or other.

Many of the most treasured traditions of the Anthropology Department were due to Lilo's inspiration. While Lilo was a very private person, she believed in creating society. Thoroughly an anthropologist, she was instrumental in initiating our Program in Anthropological Experience, unique in the United States, possibly in the world, which sends undergraduate students out to do independent field research. Always the teacher, she devised the Marco Polo Talks: fora for students who have participated in the Program in Anthropological Experience or in other JYA programs to share their experience and insights with their peers and professors. Knowing the importance of ceremony, she developed our Spring Initiation, a secret ritual during which new majors and faculty are incorporated into the department, and our post-graduation reception which serves to formally send our graduated seniors into the outside world.

Lilo was always interested in new ideas, mentored younger faculty and encouraged other people in scholarship.

As in her own life, she did not allow constructed boundaries to constrict intellectual inquiry, and she was instrumental in bringing faculty and students together from the sister social sciences of sociology and geography with anthropology. In Lilo's honor, the Anthropology Department is endowing an annual prize for the best paper submitted for a course in Anthropology, Geography or Sociology. Professors will nominate, with the consent of the student author, no more than one paper per year. Judging for the prize will be done by the three department chairs. To contribute to this prize, please send a check to The Lilo Stern Prize for Undergraduate Writing to the Anthropology Department.

Respectfully submitted:

Lucille Lewis Johnson, Chair, Anthropology

Harvey Flad, Chair, Geography

Marque Miringoff, Chair, Sociology

James Lewton Brain, Emeritus Professor of
Anthropology, SUNY-New Paltz