

## Memories of Martha Ross

I first met Martha in the fall of 1974, when I enrolled in her oral history course at the University of Maryland. While I had been an English major in college, I had subsequently been stirred by what was then the “new social history,” an approach to history “from the bottom up,” that is, from the perspective of those who had typically been ignored or misrepresented in our understanding of the past, including workers, racial minorities, immigrants and their American-born children, and women. A friend had introduced me to the Anonymous Families History Project, an initiative developed by Richard Brown at UConn and Tamara Hareven, then at Clark University, that sought to document the lives of these “ordinary Americans” through the lens of family history and, importantly, that relied primarily on oral history interviews. So, when I saw Martha’s course listed in the Maryland catalogue, I *knew* I had to take it. I even called Martha at home before registration to apprise her of my interest – she was, I recall, most gracious in accepting my call and supporting my interest.

Although I cannot find my course notes, I do remember that Martha taught the fundamental principles of oral history that have guided my work for nearly four decades. In essence, she taught that oral history involved a lot more than simply putting a tape recorder – and then it *was* a tape recorder – in front of someone and asked them to “tell me about your life.” She taught that oral history involved careful preparation, especially the need for extensive background research to set a context for the interview, the development of an interview outline to guide its conduct, and the cultivation of rapport by means of a preinterview. She taught that an interview required thoughtful, probing questioning, inspired by sincere interest in the person and his/her story and driven forward by both a critical sensibility and a sensitivity to where the narrator was at in relation to both the topic at hand and the interview itself. And she taught that an interview didn’t end when we turned the recorder off: it required extensive follow up, including signing a release; transcribing and indexing the tape; placing tape, transcript, and supporting documentation in a public repository; developing an appropriate finding aid; and publicizing the interview so that others would know about and use it. Martha had class members do a practice interview with each other; then each of us had to interview someone for a half hour about their memories of President Kennedy’s assassination. For our final project, each of us had to prepare for, conduct, and follow up on a one hour interview with someone active in the student movement at Maryland, for inclusion in the university’s archives. One of her most effective assignments was a question-by-question analysis of a class member’s Kennedy assassination interview – a practice I continue with my students. And she had us review a book that made extensive use of oral history – if I recall correctly, I reviewed Martin Duberman’s *Black Mountain*.

I believe Martha’s interest in oral history was more than academic. She was getting in on the ground floor of a new mode of inquiry, a new field – and her enthusiasm was palpable. Coupled with her considerable social skill and generous spirit, this enthusiasm opened up for me – and for countless others – a world of colleagues and networks that have since lain at the core of my professional identity. She told me of the work of Jean Scarpaci, then professor of history at Towson State University, who was using oral history to document and promote Baltimore’s ethnic history. I remember bicycling up to Towson from my home in Baltimore to meet Jean, who then opened up for me the world of Baltimore

social historians, both lay and professional, which led to my first job in oral history, working for the Baltimore Neighborhood Heritage Project, which led to my attending my first OHA meeting in 1978 and then to my first professional publication, and on and on. Martha also invited me to attend the gathering that led to the founding of OHMAR in 1976, an organization that I continue to participate in. Indeed, I owe Martha a great deal.

But there is one more thing. When I entered graduate school in 1974, I was what was then called a “returning student.” I had been out of school for some years, was married and the mother of a young child. When I had married, I figured that was what I would “do” with my life – be wife and mother. Then, along came the women’s movement and with it a dim awareness that I could do and be something more: graduate school was a first halting step towards that something more. I was, however, a naïve and insecure – one might say panicked – graduate student that first year; I was not well prepared for the rigors of graduate study and I was besieged with self doubt. Martha was a ray of hope: the first day of class she told us a bit about her personal history, that she had gone back to school when her sixth – sixth! – child started school. And she was a good generation older than me. Well, that knowledge was, quite simply, a relief and an inspiration to me. So, thank you Martha. You live on in all of us.

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