

Princeton Personality by Jean Stratton

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LITERARY JOURNEY: “To be successful, you must have a passion. I think one reason the program has succeeded is because literature is such a fantastic thing; so rich and entertaining. It catches your emotions, makes you think, takes you on a journey. In this case, the journey is together with other people.” Sarah Hirschman, founder of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, is shown next to a bookcase in her home.

Sarah Hirschman, Founder of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, Wins “Bud” Vivian Award

“It is not enough to have a good mind. The main thing is to use it well.”

—René Descartes

This advice by the French philosopher has surely been at the forefront of Sarah Hirschman’s life and work. This year’s winner of the Leslie “Bud” Vivian Award for Community Service, Mrs. Hirschman is highly educated, with an undergraduate degree in philosophy and master’s degree in French literature. Her schooling in Paris was complemented by reading Russian classic literature under the guidance of a Russian tutor, and she later studied existential philosophy with Simone de Beauvoir. She has put this comprehensive education and knowledge to use for others, especially those without formal education. By founding People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, Mrs. Hirschman has enabled participants to share the richness of great literature and by doing so, gain insight into their own lives.

Born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1921, Sarah was the daughter of Russian Jewish parents, Nicholas and Fania Chapiro. Mr. Chapiro was a businessman, and when Sarah (known as “Sarotchka” to family and

friends) was 4, the family moved to Paris. Strong Russian influences remained very important in her life, remembers Mrs. Hirschman. "I had a Russian tutor, Konstantin Vasilevitch Motchulsky, who was a famous literary critic, and he said to me, 'We'll just read together.' I started reading Russian literature very early, and this had a big impact on me."

Lycée Molière

At 6, Sarah came down with scarlet fever, which was a very serious illness. "I was so sick, I needed a nurse, and a Russian woman, Ekaterina Liubimovna Lixacheva, came to live with us. This woman was very cultured, and she had trained as a nurse. She stayed with us, and really brought me up. She had a great influence on me." At the same time, Sarah enjoyed school at the Lycée Molière in Paris, and was a good student. School was basically for learning and study; there were not a lot of extracurricular activities, as is the case in U.S. schools. Sarah did participate in gymnastics, and on vacations, she and the family took trips in France, especially to the beach, where she enjoyed swimming.

"One of my favorite memories is of lying on the grass and looking up at the mirabelles (little yellow plums) on the trees," recalls Mrs. Hirschman. "When I was a child, I was only allowed to see animal and nature movies, but as I got older, I enjoyed the cultural life of Paris. I went on expeditions to museums and theater, and later, after I was 17 or 18, I went to Avant Garde French theater."

Also when she was 18, she had the opportunity to study Existentialism for a year with Simone de Beauvoir, which prompted a great interest in philosophy.

Good Ear

In 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, Sarah's life changed drastically, when the family moved to the U.S. "I wasn't really aware of all that was going on, but my father felt that terrible things were happening in Europe, and he wanted to leave France. We left for New York in the fall of 1939. I didn't know English, and I was very depressed to leave France. I wanted to stay. I felt I was French, and I wanted to defend France."

Nevertheless, once in New York, Sarah put her mind to learning English, first by auditing classes in Plato at Columbia University. She had a good ear for language, and began to pick up English readily. Then, with the help of a friend of her parents, she went to Cornell for one semester. Sarah didn't care for the rules and regulations at Cornell, however, and was glad when her parents moved to California, and she transferred to Berkeley, where she entered as a junior. "I majored in philosophy, but I didn't like the department's emphasis on logical positivism; I got my bachelor's degree in philosophy, but then switched to French literature for my master's."

While an undergraduate, Sarah lived in the International House with other foreign students. There, she met Albert O. Hirschman, a young German scholar in economics, who had previously lived in France for a number of years.

Sarah and Albert were married in 1941, and two years later, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services). Sarah received a Fellowship to Columbia, and then her studies were postponed by the birth of their first child, Katia, in 1944. Another daughter, Lisa, was born in 1946.

Marshall Plan

After the war, the Hirschmans moved to Washington, D.C., where Albert was working with the Marshall Plan. "It was very difficult to get housing after the war," remembers Mrs. Hirschman. "A woman actually gave up her house to us, and she lived in a trailer in the back yard."

In 1952, Mr. Hirschman was approached by the World Bank to oversee economic development in Colombia, and the family moved to Bogotá, a move that was to have an important effect on Mrs. Hirschman's life and work.

"I loved Colombia. I learned Spanish, and became interested in young writers there. It was a great inspiration to me in my work. I was interested to see that people had different ways of doing things. I became aware of the ingenious ways people solved problems, and I went on expeditions, and met so many young writers and painters. There were also colonies of Russian, French, and German people, and the country was incredibly beautiful."

The Hirschmans returned to the U.S. in 1956 when Dr. Hirschman (he had earlier earned a Ph.D.) received an invitation from Yale to write a book about economic development. Mrs. Hirschman took anthropology courses there, and continued to emphasize her strong interest in studying people and their problem-solving practices.

Another university beckoned in 1958. Professor Hirschman was asked to teach economic development at Columbia. Mrs. Hirschman had a series of part-time jobs, including with Heilbroner's Latin American magazine.

"Albert was planning a book during this time and had to travel a lot," says Mrs. Hirschman. "I decided I could work as his assistant, and I learned the way he thought about problems; how solutions evolved and developed. It's not just logic."

So Different

The Hirschmans traveled to El Salvador, Peru, Uruguay, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Uganda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and later to the Dominican Republic. She remembers "studying dams in Calcutta and bicycle cooperatives in the Dominican Republic. Each place was so different."

In 1966, she had an adventure of another kind, this time in New York. Her ability to speak Spanish was an important factor in how her career progressed. "I worked with sociologist Clara Barksdale on the Lower East Side. We worked with Latinos, and I learned a great deal. The people would come in with their problems — not just 'we have rats in the apartment,' but about difficulties with their families. This was very important to me. How do you get people to talk about themselves and get them to think more critically about their problems?"

Later that year, when Dr. Hirschman was asked to teach economics at Harvard, they moved to Cambridge, and Mrs. Hirschman worked at a skill training center, again helping Hispanic people. She was also employed at Boston University, and was in charge of placing professional Latin American women in temporary training jobs while they were studying in the U.S.

A few years later, she was strongly influenced by a seminar with Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire. "It was about how he had taught literacy to poor people in northeastern Brazil and how to relate literacy to the lives of the people; the importance of life experiences in learning," she explains.

Short Stories

"This really impressed me, and I thought maybe I could do it with short stories and how people could talk through those about their own life experiences. In 1972, I decided just like that to go to public housing in Cambridge and see if there was interest in this. I talked with Puerto Rican women, and they were receptive." Thus emerged *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* (then known only as *Gente y Cuentos*), a new way of learning and sharing great literature. The participants often had little or no formal education, and some were illiterate. But the beginnings of an intriguing idea had taken root.

“I read stories aloud in Spanish, and the people would enter the stories through experiences in their own lives,” explains Mrs. Hirschman. “So the perspective of the story and their own individual perspectives connected.”

Making a connection. That is the key.

“This is done in a group,” continues Mrs. Hirschman. “The participants’ view of the story depends on their own experiences. When they see that they can talk about it, that they can hear themselves, they become validated. They defend their point of view and become curious about others. It also gives people enormous pleasure. “I always say ‘What’s democracy?’ A chance for people who don’t usually have a voice to participate.”

Specific Question

The sessions, which usually take place once a week for six to eight weeks for an hour and a half to two hours, with a new story each week, are very non-judgmental, she adds. “The climate is very welcoming. The story does not demand a conclusion; it asks questions, makes you wonder, spikes your imagination. The people are not inhibited.” As the coordinator or facilitator, Mrs. Hirschman would follow the reading with a question. “Most often, I like to have silence after the reading aloud, to let the story resonate. Then, I usually like to ask a specific question on some salient line or moment of the story to start the conversation. I never ask questions that are too general like: ‘Well, how did you like the story?’ That kind of question would certainly result in vague, uninteresting comments.

“If a question goes to some surprising or particularly suggestive moment, the conversation becomes honest, imaginative. People are forced to think for themselves.” The program began to grow, and the first group was followed by another, then another. Mrs. Hirschman worked hard to compile an interesting bibliography, and included the works of such authors as Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Julio Cortázos, Jorge Luis Borges, and Juan Rulfo for the Spanish curriculum.

In 1974, the Hirschmans headed south to Princeton, when Dr. Hirschman became a member of the faculty in the School of Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study. Mrs. Hirschman was determined to continue *Gente y Cuentos* in a new locale, and contacted a priest at Mt. Carmel Church in Trenton.

“I suggested the idea, and he was interested. Then, I went out and continued to sell the idea all over New Jersey, including Newark. We had programs in community centers in the Trenton area, Newark, and other locations in the state.”

NEH Grant

As the program grew, more people began to take part in a variety of locations, including learning centers, residential treatment centers, libraries, and prisons. In 1981-82, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant enabled the project to expand to other states and locations, including Florida, Texas, New York, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Puerto Rico. Mrs. Hirschman held workshops to train others in the program’s concept and methods. Also in 1982, Mrs. Hirschman was invited to set up a program in a barrio outside Buenos Aires, and the following year, she taught a course in the program’s method at the University of Buenos Aires.

Up to now, she had been operating the programs primarily on her own, and by 1985, she realized she needed help. “Also, in 1985-86, we added an English program, and I wanted to do an inter-generational (senior citizens and high school students) and an inter-town (Princeton and Trenton) project. This was a precursor of *Crossing Borders*,” she explains. “I held a big workshop, and Pat Andres participated. She became a coordinator, and later in 2000, executive director. I owe a great deal to Pat, who continued to help develop the program.”

The English program, *People & Stories*, began in 1986 in New Jersey under the sponsorship of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, whose support has been continuous. The project became a non-profit corporation in 1993. Mrs. Hirschman has the respect, admiration, and affection of colleagues and those who have participated in the programs. She has been honored with awards from various organizations, including the Public Humanities Award from the New Jersey Council of the Humanities in 1994. "Your commitment ... has opened the riches of literature to many Through *People & Stories*, you have reached out to include those often excluded, and have encouraged those often mistakenly thought not capable of participating to partake of the resources that the humanities offer" reads the statement.

Spanish Speakers

Lawrence R. McCarty, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Foreign Languages at Community College of Philadelphia, is a coordinator of *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* at community centers in the Philadelphia area. He comments on Mrs. Hirschman's fluency in various languages and its impact on the program.

"Sarah is multilingual and fluent in Spanish. It is through her efforts that *Gente y Cuentos* has reached so many Spanish speakers and new arrivals in the U.S.A. She, together with the bilingual team, identify the great short stories to be included in the Spanish bibliography.

"I have known Sarah since 2000, and she has proven to be a wise adviser and loyal colleague to all her fellow coordinators. It is through her guidance that we coordinators have learned that we are also participants, as together we explore the universal themes and poetic imagery found in great short stories. It is important to recognize Sarah Hirschman's initiative and earnest dedication to this program." Support for the program has continued to expand. An NEH grant in 2004-05 enabled *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* to reach 14 additional states. In the US, 1,000 people now participate in the program every year in 35 locations and under the guidance of 22 coordinators.

For all her efforts in establishing, developing, and continuing this unique program, Mrs. Hirschman was recently honored with the 12th annual Leslie "Bud" Vivian Award for Community Service. The award was presented by the Princeton Area Community Foundation at a reception at the Princeton Public Library on Mat 22. Mrs. Hirschman's nominators described her as a "citizen of the world ... who developed a way to invite those with basic literacy skills to enjoy and benefit from the same artistic works usually studied in college classrooms. She has included thousands of people in a world where the doors were previously closed. She has found ways to bring people together in discussions driven by complex stories that don't offer easy answers, but encourage people to explore values and talk about difficult questions."

New Readers

The sentiments of the award nominators are echoed by Mrs. Hirschman's colleagues. "Sarah is dear to my heart. I value my 21-year relationship with her as a friend and as a mentor," says Patricia Andres, *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* executive director. "I have been privileged to witness the joy her creation has given many, many people, especially new readers of literature. Sarah's inspiration, that literature holds beauty and power for all, has translated into an organization that both returns literature to the people and uses it as a venue to create deeper understanding among those of different educational and cultural backgrounds." Adds Marcy Schwartz, Professor of Latin-American literature at Rutgers, and a coordinator in the program, who currently works with a group of inmates at Yardville Prison: "Sarah is completely inspiring. She is a real mentor in so many ways. She is a person of astounding depth and knowledge.

"She has huge amounts of energy and determination, and has been unwavering in her dedication to this program she has created in which people's voices are heard, their opinions count. In this program, everyone is listened to, and everyone's life experience is valued. It's not about having a right answer; it's about exploring."

Mrs. Hirschman is delighted to see the program continue to expand. "I am very excited about the two projects in Colombia and France. My daughter Katia is director of *People & Stories* in France, and there are

already 30 programs each year. Colombia is also especially receptive to the project since there is so much interest in books and libraries there. They have a program of their own in which a little book is distributed at every bus station for people to take and share with family and friends. Then, they can return it to another bus stop.”

A world traveler, Mrs. Hirschman has found Princeton a congenial place to call home for the past 34 years. “I’ve met a lot of interesting people in Princeton,” she reports. “I like walking in the woods, I like to take the train to New York, and there are interesting events at the Institute. I also have lots of friends at Princeton University.” A long-time friend of more than 30 years is Hildred Geertz, Professor Emeritus of Cultural Anthropology and one of the first female professors at Princeton University. Professor Geertz emphasizes the importance of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to Mrs. Hirschman.

Rich Treasure

“I want to say that the People & Stories project has always been central to Sarah’s whole being. She is a deeply literary person and profoundly European. For her, language is a rich treasure, whatever the language. With People & Stories, she not only read the stories, she taught the people how to hear them. She wanted to give them back their literature, their verbal arts. She succeeded in reaching and conveying the excitement of their own literature and art. It has been an amazing way of life, and it is ongoing.”

Indeed. Although no longer a hands-on coordinator, Mrs. Hirschman continues to be very active in compiling the bibliography for the program, which in English has included the works of James Joyce, Eudora Welty, Jamaica Kincaid, and Langston Hughes, among others. She is especially involved with the Spanish bibliography and works closely with the coordinators in Gente y Cuentos.

Her own reading continues undiminished; the fact that she is able to read and converse in four languages offers her many more opportunities than most of us have. “I read a lot in French and Russian,” she reports. “I’m continually re-reading the Russian classics, especially Dostoevsky, and I read Chekhov every night. I also just re-read all of Montaigne in French. The only nice thing about old age is that you can read from scratch all over again, and it will seem like new, as one’s memory fades.”

Mrs. Hirschman shows no sign of that particular problem; her vitality and energy belie her years. She is a regular visitor to Princeton University’s Firestone Library. “What I really like best in Princeton is Firestone Library. I can find books there in all my languages. When my husband retired from the Institute some years ago, we thought about moving to Paris. Our daughter lives there, and we have grandchildren and great-grandchildren there. But I just couldn’t leave Firestone. I am fortunate to have a card there.”

Amazing Growth

Mrs. Hirschman is very close to her daughter Katia, who traveled from France to attend the “Bud” Vivian Award reception. She was also very close to her daughter Lisa, who died nine years ago.

As she reflects on People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos and the honor of receiving the “Bud” Vivian Award, Mrs. Hirschman is astonished at the amazing growth of her program. “My initial desire was very, very modest. I just wanted to share my love of reading and enjoyment of literature with people who had not had the opportunity to read. Also, it was finding a way of communicating with people whom I never had had a chance to know.

“From that came all kinds of unexpected consequences; from the conversations came emotions and pleasures. And, I not only had the pleasure of communicating with people, but the conversations became critical discussions, a way of developing the mind in a less scholarly way. All kinds of subjects came up; there was give and take, and all kinds of people were able to voice their ideas and listen to others. It became more important than I had ever expected.” If ever there was an example of one person making a positive difference in the lives of others, Mrs. Hirschman must surely be the model.