

Memorial Minute for Louis Cohn-Haft
Read by Howard Nenner, Faculty Meeting, February 29, 2012

Louis Cohn-Haft, Professor Emeritus of History, died at his home in Italy on November 15th, two days after his ninety-second birthday. Born and reared in New York City as “Louis Cohn” he added “Haft,” his mother’s maiden name, to his pedigree. With his first marriage, to Athena Capraro, he added the nickname “Luigi,” by which he was known affectionately to scores of colleagues and friends.

Louis' formal education was entirely in New York City, culminating in his years at Columbia University where he received his B.A. (1941), M.A. (1949), and Ph.D (1955). During the Second World War he was an instructor in aerial navigation with the Army Air Corps. In 1953, after three years of teaching at Columbia College, he arrived at Smith, where he introduced students to the history of ancient Greece, Rome, and the Near East in a manner that many of them have never quite forgotten. Peggy Jamieson, '73, reminiscing in 2008, cited Lou’s seminar on Hellenistic Greece as the academic high point of her four years at Smith. Another former student, Susan Allen Toth, '61, recalled Lou's pedagogical "tour of ancient history" in her memoir, *Ivy Days*, as “a revelation. It not only introduced me to people, like the Assyrians and Sumerians, I'd never heard of,” she wrote, “but it also objectively refuted my Presbyterian Sunday school certainties about the origins of the Christian religion.” In each of his courses Lou's basic purpose was just that, to have his students evaluate historical evidence and question the "certainties" of the past. By every account he appears to have succeeded.

The other main thread of Lou’s professional career, his scholarly work in Ancient Greece, demonstrates the same concern with the ways that history gets written. In his study, *The Public Physicians of Ancient Greece* (1956), after more than fifty years still the standard work on the subject, he wrote that "Philology divorced from history is a very limited instrument and is patently inappropriate in attacking a problem that is not literary or linguistic, but essentially social and historical." It is this belief that informed much of Lou's work since. It was in evidence in his excursion into the classical antecedents of eighteenth-century American constitutional rhetoric, and it is central to his articles on ancient Greek marriage, notably “Divorce in Classical Athens,” in the *Journal of Hellenic*

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Studies (1995) and, most recently, “Violence to Women,” in *Mazzo Di Fiori*, a *Festschrift for Herbert Hoffman* (2010).

With Luigi’s retirement in 1987, Smith College and the Department of History lost the service of one of their best. A member of the faculty for thirty-four years, he distinguished himself as a voice of unflagging decency and uncommon good sense. Those of us who were his junior colleagues remember with gratitude his treatment of us – preeminently fair and always supportive, with never a trace of condescension. His department colleagues of whatever vintage will also recall Lou’s wise and impeccable service in his several terms as chair. In the counsels of his department, the faculty at large, the Committee on Tenure and Promotion, the Faculty Grievance Committee, and, perhaps most significantly in countless unofficial forums, he spoke insistently and effectively for his deeply held belief that intelligence is divided equally between the sexes, and for his one institutional passion, that due process is in no circumstances to be compromised or disregarded. The two often went hand-in-hand, and to his credit and the college’s good fortune Lou was heard more frequently than he might ever have supposed.

Shortly after his retirement Luigi and his wife, Betty Schlerman, moved to Castellina-in-Chianti, a picturesque village in the hills of Tuscany, where Betty indulges her passion for gardening and where Luigi devoted himself to good food, good wine, good books, good conversation – and mediocre (but still above average) golf. None of this came as a surprise to those who knew him. That he became a dog lover in his old age is another matter, but Luigi was always full of surprises.

Lou is survived by Betty; his three children, Hera and her husband David, Tony and his partner Trish, and Mario and his wife Rita; his step-sons, Carl and his wife Sue, and Franklin; and by his grandchildren, Rebekah, Mariah, Alexander, and Isaac; and his step-grandchildren, Else, Marlana, and A.J. He also leaves behind friends and colleagues who cherished his warmth, his humor, and his intelligence. We will miss him.