
Hanna Holborn Gray begins her autobiography by reporting that her parents “came from families of what is usually called the Bildungsburgertum (loosely translated as “educated upper bourgeoisie”)”. She then goes on to recite her extraordinary academic genealogy: her paternal grandfather was a research physicist who was a board member of the Imperial Institute of Physics and Technology. Her maternal grandfather was a physician. Her father was a distinguished history professor and her mother received a PhD in Latin.

Christian academics (although, in the past, her mother’s family had converted from Judaism to Luthernism), the Holborn’s were supporters of Germany’s post World War I Weimar Republic. The rise of Hitler made them unwelcome. Professor Holborn, the author’s father, emigrated to the U.S. and, unlike other displaced academics, landed a prime job in the history department at Yale. Professor and Mrs. Holborn raised a son, Frederick Holborn, who went on to a distinguished career as foreign policy advisor to Senator and subsequently President John F. Kennedy and became a Johns Hopkins University faculty member, and a daughter, Hanna Holborn.

Hanna studied at Bryn Mawr College and received a PhD in history from Harvard where she met and married a fellow graduate student, Charles Gray. In her career Hanna Holborn Gray was “the first woman to” be many things: dean of the college of arts and sciences at Northwestern University, provost at Yale University, acting president at Yale University, president of the University of Chicago, and chair of the board of the Howard Hughes Medical Research Institute.

Professor Gray dissects the culture and foibles of academic life, administrative battles, the problems of managing a medical school and a law school, fundraising, and dealing with elected officials. She writes in clear and understandable prose and is particularly good at outlining what are and are not the responsibilities of members of the board of trustees of colleges and universities.

If you’re interested in academic management and the past and future of American higher education, you’ll enjoy the book. If you’re interested in even the most minimal academic gossip outside of the fine points of who’s up and who’s down in the world of professors of medieval and Renaissance history, take a pass – even Professor Gray’s marriage and husband appear only as fleeting characters. In the midst of the current debate in the U.S. regarding immigration policy, the story of the Holborn’s 1930 move from Germany to America is worth reading and reflecting upon.

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