

PROFILE

R Barbara Gitenstein

BY DOREEN WACHMANN

College's first female president always felt like an outsider



RBARBARA Gitenstein, who has just published the first volume of her biography, *Experience is an Angled Road — Memoir of an Academic*, was the first female and first Jewish president of the College of New Jersey.

In America, a college president is roughly the equivalent of a vice-chancellor at a British university. Barbara was appointed president in 1999.

It compares favourably with Cambridge, which appointed its first female vice-chancellor in 2003, and America's female president at the prestigious Harvard in 2007.

Barbara always felt an outsider. She was one of only 10 Jews among the 1,800 Baptists and Methodists in the Alabama town of Florala, where her factory owner father was the town's principal employer.

Later, in academia, she also felt disadvantaged as a Southerner.

She said: "I grew up in a situation where it was clear that I was an oddity because I grew up in the South."

Barbara is not sure whether she was discriminated against for top jobs because of her Jewish identity, as she was openly Jewish, having published works on Jewish literature.

She said: "I always presented

'I loved academia and later really missed teaching'

myself as Jewish because that was my research and my name. I simply wouldn't have made it through the filter, so I wouldn't have seen that."

She added: "I've always strongly identified as a Jew, but I'm not religious."

Barbara's initial ambition was to be an opera singer.

But, she said: "When I got to college I found that my voice was not that good. So I had to redirect my energy."

"I turned my focus from music to American and English literature. I did my research on Jewish literature."

She wrote her PhD dissertation on Yiddish influences on Jewish American fiction, examining authors, Abraham Cahan, the founding editor of the *Forward*, Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Her book, *Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-*

American Poetry, is about the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah on 20th century literature.

She began her academic career by teaching literature at university.

She said: "I loved academia and later really missed teaching."

But she decided to go into top level academic administration because, she said, "I really believed that higher education is the solution to so many problems."

"It has so much promise for making a better world. The American Association of Colleges & Universities has done a lot of research on the outcomes of people who finish a four-year degree."

"Statistics indicate that not only do they make more money, but they actually have better health results. There are better results for their children being healthy and for their children succeeding."

"They are better citizens. They are more apt to vote, more apt to be involved in social service and justice."

"I don't know how you can be a citizen of a democracy and not be well educated to understand what is true in what candidates say. Your obligation is to be a thoughtful responder and participant."

She continued: "I was looking around at the people who were in academic administrative management positions."

"I thought that they were making bad decisions, selfish decisions that reinforced their personal position, but didn't necessarily put forward the good of the whole institution. I saw that as doing damage."

"People would choose to develop programmes that didn't necessarily respond to the needs of the

business community, nor to the students' interests, but would get that particular leader recognised as a scholar or as an expert so that their prestige would go up."

In her search for top administrative jobs she experienced "absolute prejudice" because she was a woman.

She said: "I began to realise that people would put up different obstacles so that they weren't going to consider you seriously. You could just feel it."

But having been in a minority all her life, she said: "One of the things that I learned was that it was very unproductive to whine. You simply had to embrace the fact that you had to work hard and, in some cases, be better than the guys. It wasn't fair, but that was just the reality."

"I can't even tell you how many position I applied for. There were so many that I don't remember."

In 1992, Barbara was appointed executive vice-president at Drake University, Iowa, and then as the university's first female provost — the equivalent of chief academic officer at a British university — before moving to the College of New Jersey as president.

She said: "That was an institution that was ready for me and embraced me. I was there for 19 years. That's a very long time. Successful presidencies are almost always a positive fit."

At first she tried to combine teaching with administration.

But, she said: "When I was president, there was a terrible fire in a local university's residency. Two students died and 10 were terribly injured."

"I was sitting in the classroom when I realised that I was not thinking about the literature I was supposed to be thinking about, but I was thinking about

fire suppressants and whether our residents are all safe."

"That's what I should have been thinking about. That was my responsibility to protect those kids. I felt I couldn't keep my head in the classroom."

Having always been in a minority, she said, was an advantage in her position.

She said: "It was not hard for me to try to see through other people's eyes. Students could sense that I really wanted to listen to them. It didn't mean that I would agree with them."

She continued: "It is extremely important in these senior jobs, certainly in education nowadays, that you are able to listen to other people and hear what they are saying and answer for the institution in a way that incorporates both your opinions. I've always had to do that."

She gave an example of an occasion during her presidency when students took over her conference room.

She said: "They were protesting and came to me with demands. I said I'd be pleased to talk about concerns, but you don't demand of me and I don't demand of you."

Yet in the late 1960s, when Barbara herself was a student at Drake University, North Carolina, she and her brother Mark had been involved in a sit-in at its president Doug Knight's home, protesting the Vietnam War.

She writes in *Experience is an Angled Road*: "I became completely exasperated with Doug Knight's lack of response to a set of demands by students."

Although in my interview with her she said she had been "certainly sympathetic rather than active" in the protest, her memoir recounts how she phoned Mr

Knight's home, spoke to Mrs Knight who called her husband to the phone, when he explained to her that he had been ill and invited the students to a meeting two days later.

So even in her student days Barbara was taking more of a conciliatory tone than many of her fellow students and the academic establishment.

In fact, she complained in our interview that because the Drake protest was peaceful, it gained no press publicity.

She said: "When the national press was contacted about why the Duke protest was not reported, but protests at Columbia University were, the leaders of the protest were told that once you have violence we will come."

"That was pretty sordid and cynical. But kudos to the leaders of that group that there was never any violence."

In fact, Barbara is critical of the way New York's Columbia University handled recent student protests about the war in Gaza.

She said: "The way it's been handled has not been a high point. If you look at other campuses where things were handled better, they were not in the news."

"Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, has had longstanding communication access between disparate student groups and the administration. The problem was not the most thoughtful management. Bringing in police on campus is always going to make things worse."

Experience is an Angled Road — Memoir of an Academic will be followed in January 2025 by its sequel, *Portrait of a Presidency — Patterns in My Life*, to be published by Koehler Books.

DIGEST

Chief Rabbi joins council

CHIEF Rabbi Sir Ephraim Mirvis has joined Bar-Ilan University's Council of Founders.

Composed of 14 members, half living in Israel and half overseas, its role is to provide spiritual direction to the Ramat Gan-based university.

Sir Ephraim has been a long-standing supporter of Bar-Ilan, one of Israel's leading universities, which combines scientific research with education steeped in Jewish values.

It has more than 20,000 students and is the fastest growing university in the Jewish state.



Honour for merger overseer

THE chairman of the advisory board which oversaw the unification of Reform and Liberal Judaism has received a top honour.

Dr Ed Kessler, pictured left, is the recipient of the Seelisberg Prize.

Granted annually by the

International Council of Christians and Jews and the Centre for Intercultural Theology and Religions at the University of Salzburg, it honours individuals who have played major roles in developing understanding between the two religions.

The prize is named in memo-

ry of the groundbreaking gathering in the Swiss village of Seelisberg in 1947 to address perennial Christian teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism.

Dr Kessler has written or edited 12 books on Jewish-Christian relations.