members that came into QC at the same time as I did. Culinary explorations in Flushing have allowed us to get to know each other beyond the obligatory bonding of new faculty orientation, making my first year a particularly enjoyable social experience as well. Friendly guidance from the department chair, mentorship and encouragement from colleagues, and the precious assistance from the department secretaries, have all helped me navigate obstacles and made the past two semesters fruitful and rewarding. I look forward to many more to come.

Honors Party attendees: Professor Emeritus Michael Wreszin, Professor Rossabi, and Alumnus Mark Williner
FIRST-YEAR IMPRESSIONS

From Elissa Bemporad

How could I not be overjoyed to have a tenure-track position in my own field of specialization (East European Jewish history), in the History Department of a great public university, in the city of New York? Add to that the friendly and collegial atmosphere that reigns throughout the halls and in the department office—where there’s coffee and conversation—and senior faculty members offering words of wisdom to newcomers like me. One thing that is unique here is the student body. I’m always amazed when I enter the classroom and see people from so many different countries, beliefs, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. This is all the more so for someone like me, who grew up in Italy, a very homogeneous place culturally, linguistically, and religiously. When I studied as an undergraduate at Bologna University, a foreign student was a rarity and a big event in the History Department. Of course, it is a challenge to address, involve, and motivate such a diverse group of people.

Teaching the Holocaust, which is one of my main assignments at Queens, is quite different; I believe, from teaching about the history of French peasant life in the 18th century or about the history of socialism in America. Teaching about genocide is a special responsibility, because it regards not only an enormous crime against humanity, but also the moral failure of the bystanders who did not intervene. I work with my students, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to appreciate the magnitude of the event called the Holocaust, and at the same time think about it historically and analytically. I want my students to respond both emotionally and intellectually to the subject without ever losing sight of both perspectives.

My other field, and true passion, is the history of medieval Jewish culture. I have always felt drawn to this because it regards not only an anti-Semitic state. Those kinds of engaged conversations, where students tend to believe that all European Jews are the same, is a special responsibility, because it regards not only a crimes against humanity, but also the moral failure of those who did not intervene. I work with my students, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to appreciate the magnitude of the event called the Holocaust, and at the same time think about it historically and analytically. I want my students to respond both emotionally and intellectually to the subject without ever losing sight of both perspectives.

The guest lecture by survivor Stella Levi, who was an inmate at Auschwitz for five months, was perhaps the culmination of the course this past semester. A native of Rhodes, Stella exposed students to the particular sub-identity of the island’s “Greek-Irish” Jews, and to the difficulties encountered between different Jewish groups when they met for the first time within the confines of the camp. She also gave a vivid portrait of everyday life in Auschwitz, especially that of women. The students listened intently, and could integrate her first-hand testimony with the scholarly literature they had read (or, in some cases, had not read).

My field, and true passion, is the history and culture of Jews in Eastern Europe—most particularly in the Soviet Union. I am fortunate to teach at a college where this is an obscure, unknown topic. Queens has a large community of immigrant students from the former Soviet Union, most of whom are Jewish. I challenge my “former Soviet students,” who are usually very anti-Soviet, to go beyond their personal experiences and feelings. I’ve had many heated conversations with students, trying to explain that the U.S.S.R. was not always an anti-Semitic state. These kinds of engaged conversations are what every teacher hopes to have with students. I’m looking forward to having many more of them.

From Francesca Bregoli

Soon after I started teaching at Queens College, I found myself lost in downtown Flushing. It was my first time there and I was looking for the subway, but I ended up almost boarding the LIRR instead. I quickly realized something was wrong. On the platform, I recognized a QC student who helpfully told me how to get to the right place. I did not venture downtown again until a couple of months later, when a friend and colleague took me to an underground Chinese food court, the Golden Mall. This pleasant surprise (the dumplings were delicious!) marked the beginning of many epicurean adventures in Flushing since then. My first year at QC has been full of such experiences of newness, discovery, and fortunate encounters.

I consider myself extremely lucky to have joined a friendly and congenial department with so many supportive colleagues who pursue exciting lines of research. Despite the rumors difficulties about being a “first-year faculty member,” I was welcomed from the start and enjoyed many illuminating conversations.

Although I was already familiar with American higher education through my graduate training at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Pennsylvania, I have grown to appreciate the cultural differences between college education in the U.S. and the kind of top-down undergraduate training I received in Italy. I learn something new everyday from the students in my courses. Before coming to Queens College, I was a Junior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford in England. There I taught early modern Jewish history to small graduate classes, something that involved mostly face-to-face tutoring. At Queens College, I have the opportunity to teach a wide variety of Jewish history topics to large undergraduate classes in a public university setting, an environment that I have always longed to teach in.

Class size illustrates a quality of QC that most of my colleagues at other institutions look at with admiration, and sometimes envy. The enormous interest in Jewish history among students makes QC a very special place to work. This is a real blessing for me; it can also be quite a challenge from a pedagogical point of view. My students come from widely diverse experiences in terms of both their preparedness for college and level of familiarity with the subject, as well as their family backgrounds, ethnicities, and religious upbringing. I have found that one really must learn to strike a balance: finding a language and style of teaching that reaches everybody, remaining accessible to students who may be encountering Jewish history for the first time, while satisfying the interests and questions of those with more advanced knowledge.

The students’ questions and comments, so reflective of their diverse backgrounds, force me to think about the material, and how best to teach it, in ways that I may not have anticipated before. At the same time, I attempt to challenge them back, both academically and in terms of their preconceptions. Many of my students approach pre-modern Jewish history with the strong sense that it is an unrelenting series of persecutions. I try to correct this stereotyping, for instance by dwelling on the many examples of Jewish cultural productivity and resilience. I have also found that students tend to believe that all European Jewish men were Aryans. They are often surprised to discover that Jews in early modern Europe were engaged in all manner of behavior, including successful business ventures, skeptical thinking, or even violent street gangs. Using these and other cases, I invite students to see Jewish history in a fuller, richer light and interrogate their very assumptions they bring into the classroom.

Inside the classroom, I was fortunate to teach students who defied right into the material, identifying in a variety of ways with the subjects we explored. In my course on Sephardi Jewish history, a student with a Turkish and Iranian background offered me her experiences based on her family history. Another student with Moroccan Iberian roots eagerly reminisced about her childhood in Morocco as we talked about family rituals and the complexity of perceived identities within the Sephardi world. It was especially gratifying to work individually with students outside the classroom. Some came to ask for advice on graduate school or, remarkably, even for recommendations to pursue further readings on topics treated in class.

In addition to my colleagues and outstanding students, another one of this year’s lucky encounters has been the cohort of new faculty. Continued on back page

Continued from preceding page

agree with many of the points in my master’s thesis. But I never felt anything but unparalleled support from him as an advisor. If my thesis has any merit, Professor Avrich deserves a great deal of credit because his kind and wise encouragement was invaluable to me as I wrote it.

Professor Avrich is best known in the wider world for chronicling the history of anarchism. Among his indispensable works are books on the Kronstadt Rebellion, the Sacco and Vanzetti Trial, and the Haymarket episode. All are wonderful books. In a paper reviewing his Haymarket book I wrote, “[T] here is nothing like the experience of reading a narrative that engages readers, that has us wanting to know what happens next, that ‘reads like a novel,’ to remind us that storytellers should not be a passeive term among historians. The Haymarket Tragedy by Paul Avrich is such a book.” His other books share this quality while also maintaining the high level of historical scholarship.

It should be obvious that I have missed Professor Avrich since my return to the college last February. But I am happy to report that his spirit still inhabits the corridors of relatively new and really nice History Department offices in Powdermaker Hall (Social Science Building) to those of you whose connection to the college predates “recent” name changes. The impression I get from the level of activity and the focus of conversations is the offices and corridors is that Professor Avrich’s commitment to scholarship and his passion for teaching is still vibrantly alive in the Queens College History Department. It is a great privilege to have a small part in the legacy that he and many other professors from his generation have left for us.

Continued on back page
As a child of the 1960s growing up in Whitehaven, Queens I remember riding past Killy Hall (then the Academic Building II) on the old Queens bus line 23/34, thinking to myself that is where I want to go to college. Being the progeny of a blue-collar family, my parents could not afford to send me out of state as much as they wanted to (not necessarily because they wanted me to receive a good education). Those were the halcyon days of free tuition at CUNY, when one would pay more for books than classes. As fate would have it, I enrolled as a freshman in 1974. Back then my hair was full and wavy like that rather than the reverse, which is the way things are now. My fondest memories of Queens College back then were the stellar and unique faculty of the department. I chose history probably for the wrong reasons as I was too indifferent to wake up early for lab class in chemistry (I still have my unopened safety goggles). I am very happy to say that two of my favorite instructors, Dr. Frank Warren and Dr. Leo Hershkowitz are still here and going strong. I had taken Dr. Warren for History 104, which was easier then as the history of the 1980s and Beyond was still in the future. Dr. Warren was easily my type of guy; when he first showed up for class he had long hair and a Sundance kid type of mustache which made me associate him with the type of anti-establishment, hip new professors that I revered. His lectures had humor, pace, and the man was a wealth of information about one of my favorite American epochs, Roosevelt’s New Deal and its attempt to assuage the ravages of the First Great Depression.

Dr. Hershkowitz was also easy-going and affable and while he did not have Dr. Warren’s radical person, he was a cornucopia of New York state and city regional history. Dr. Hershkowitz had an accent for every occasion, many of which were filled with local color and dry wit. He would make people like Washington Irving, Orson Welles, Clinton, and others come alive. Dr. Hershkowitz could also be something of an iconoclast as he revised the tarnished image of New York City.

As a history graduate student. In the spring of 1999 I took a graduate course in a very modest car, enduring his sadly provisional Government President Alexander Kerensky to Queens College. This adventure involved driving Kerensky around in a very modest car, enduring his sadly incomprehensible speech, and concluding that the aging president had very little indeed to offer posterity.

It is about forty years since I enrolled in my first undergraduate history course at Queens College. In that time the department has become more of a home for me than I ever could have anticipated. From the seventies through the nineties, I kept leaving and returning as an undergraduate major, a secondary education graduate student, and as a law school graduate student. In the spring of 2010, I returned once more; this time as an adjunct lecturer. One of my strongest impressions from my student years was of the continuity in the department. Each time I came back I encountered many of the same professors with whom I had taken undergraduate survey courses. My extended encounter with the department is unusual. I received a bonus through intellectual guidance from a stable group of scholars from the time I emerged from high school in 1969 through an extremely attenuated process that culminated in my master’s thesis in 1999. But I am sure that others benefited, as well. The department always had the feel of a stable community that provided a welcoming, secure, and stimulating home even for its most transient student members.

Readers of the alumni newsletter know that the inevitable transition to a new generation of professors is now well underway. It is good to see the newsletter updates on the retired professors whom I encountered over the years. It is not so pleasant to read about retired professors on the New York Times obituary page. Regrettably, that is how I heard of the passing of Professor Paul Avrich in February 2006. He was an inspiration to generations of Queens College students. We could not have had a better guide to the tumultuous events in twentieth-century Russia than Professor Avrich. His classes were invitations to become seriously engaged with the subject matter that he crafted with scholarly rigor balanced with a sense of excitement and fun that had a seductive impact on his student audience.

I remember him recounting his role in the late 1960s visit of Russia’s 1917 Provisional Government President Alexander Kerensky to Queens College. This adventure involved driving Kerensky around in a very modest car, enduring his sadly incomprehensible speech, and concluding that the aging president had very little indeed to offer posterity.

It is certain that Professor Avrich did not feel of a stable community that provided a welcoming, secure, and stimulating home even for its most transient student members.

My start at Queens College this past fall was both a new beginning and a much anticipated return to the familiar. Six years ago I had the privilege of holding a one-year post-doctoral position, generously funded by the Danzig foundation, in the QC Jewish studies program and the History Department. That experience proved to be a truly formative one for me. I taught two courses that year, one on Jews in the Middle East and another on Jewish, Christian, and Islamic conceptions of the Holy Land. One of the first things that struck me as I walked into the classroom on the first day of the semester was the diversity of the students sitting before me. It seemed as if I was looking at a reflection of precisely the kinds of cultural interactions that were at the core of both of my courses. As the year progressed, I watched with even more amaze ment as my students became increasingly pas sionate about the topics we were discussing in class, material I had initially feared they might find remote or irrelevant. What made the biggest impact on me, though, was witnessing over and over again the way so many of them effectively balanced the demands of college with the competing responsibilities of work and supporting a family. I came away from the year moved by the kinds of sacrifices I saw my students make in order to pursue a college degree and no less impressed by their readiness to engage new and often personally challenging ideas. I couldn’t help thinking that Queens College would be a great place to land a regular teaching position. And so, when the opportunity to return as a full-time member of the QC History Department presented itself in 2009, I can imagine how excited I was.

My first year back at Queens has lived up to, and in many ways even exceeded my expectations. The students are just as sin cere and hardworking as I remember them, and my classroom experiences continue to be immensely rewarding. Of course, that doesn’t mean that they’re always easy. One of the best moments I had this year was in a class on Jewish history in medieval Europe in which we were considering the extent to which the Jews may have been influenced by ideas and attitudes emanating from the sur rounding Christian environment. The very suggestion seemed troubling to a number of my students, and the class discussion that day was dominated by arguments against the possibility of such influence. And while other voices eventually made themselves heard, the prevailing position in the class remained one of extreme skepticism. At first, I was quite frustrated by their resistance and came away feeling like I’d completely failed. But when a series of emails exchanged the classroom conversation ensued with one of the most outspoken of the skeptics, it dawned on me that I’d actually been successful—not necessarily in persuading my students of my own position, but in something perhaps more vital: in sparking a critical engagement with deeply held but unexamined convictions. The bigger surprise for me this year has been the amazing collegiality of the History Department. As a post-doc, I had little contact with the other faculty members and no sense of how the department ran itself. And my last job…well, let’s just say it didn’t provide me with a lot of confidence in the university department as a meaningful species of human social organization. And so I was completely unprepared for the warmth, sup port, and genuine fun that I’ve consistently found in 352 Powdermaker Hall. Thank you, Queens, for the opportunity to come back. I look forward to many more great years!
In the spring of 1962, I came down by train from Providence for my job interview. I arrived rumbled with hair advise. As I stood in front of the office door in one of the now torn down Spanish-style buildings where I was supposed to meet a Professor Martin Weinbaum, I was combing my hair. Suddenly a sticky German voice behind me said “you must be Frank Warren.” It was Martin Weinbaum who then took an embarrassment to me to interview. I have forgotten most of the question, it was far from the deep interviews about scholarship that we have today. The only question I remember was asked by Professor Charlie Van Duzer in a not-too-friendly voice. “Why do you want to live in New York?” The tone suggested that no one who had a choice would want to. Van Duzer must not have been too unfriendly because I was offered the job and accepted.

Incidentally, I was to learn later that one of the reasons I was offered the job was that my PhD was not from Columbia; the department was apparently trying to diversify where its instructors received their PhDs.

When I arrived in September several days before classes, I went to see Martin Weinbaum, who was assistant chair of Contemporary Civilization, which everyone taught in those days (I taught three back-to-back sections.) and which was now the center of European History in the Department. We were supposed to discuss the syllabus, but Weinbaum kept talking about “the old professor” in relation to the Contemporary Civilization Program. I couldn’t imagine whom he was talking about since I had already met Jack Plomin from the Philosophy Department who was the chair of Contemporary Civilization. It was perhaps twenty minutes before I realized Weinbaum was referring to himself.

The department chair at the time was Charles Halberg. Halberg was a distinguished looking gentleman who reminded me in appearance of a New Yorker whiskey ad. He was a politically conservative person. When he guided me through my initial orientation, he remarked that I would be receiving a higher salary than what I was hired at and went on to comment disdainfully that it was the result of the high school teachers union’s strike that had recently won an increase. (At that time, we were tied to the high school salary scale.) Expecting a couple of hundred dollars, I asked if he knew how much; he answered $1,000—which barely put me over $7,000, but was immense.

In those years, unlike today, the professors who ran the department—Halberg, Van Duzer, Weinbaum—paid little attention to the new faculty in terms of trying to make them comfortable. They weren’t unfriendly or uncaring; it simply wasn’t part of the culture. You were hired to do a job and that was that. I shared my office with Courtney Hall, another oldtimer. Courtney Hall was friendly and considerate, but probably the age difference was the barrier that kept us from ever becoming close. I was then lucky to have Sol Lothstein seek me out, to welcome me, to introduce me to people outside the department, to invite my wife and me to his house, to introduce my family to the college Christmas parties where his and my children played together and Sol played Santa Claus. And, inevitably, to give me all the department’s goody. Sol had many “stories”—of the department, of students, especially of taking students to Europe during the summer. Affable, upbeat, thoughtful, Sol was my first Queens College friend.

I had known Allen McConnell from Brown, and though Allen got to know Andy Whisenhead, Andy’s views were the opposite of mine. He was an elitist (really a monarchist) whose political and social views were ultra-conservative. It was hard to imagine we would become friends. But Andy had wit and a sense of humor and could laugh at himself. And though he blamed the world’s problems on “creeping Warrenism,” it was always with a light touch and a smile. And he was always generous. Years later, he paved my way for a sabbatical in England with a series of people to contact, and later he offered us the use of his summer home, free, when he went to Europe.

But most of my time my first year was spent in anxiety of getting my first book out and in keeping one day ahead of my Contemporary Civilization class. I had been an English major as an undergraduate and an American Studies PhD. I had had exactly one undergraduate course in European History, though I had had a number of philosophy courses and a political theory graduate course that helped me with the “ideas” side of Contemporary Civilization. Indeed, in my CC classes, there was far more discussion of ideas than there was of the unfolding of European History. A number of years later, someone I knew said that they had worked in an office (I believe a law office) with Michael Berver, who was a student in one of my first year CC classes, and that Michael had said my CC class was the best class he had at Queens. If you are out there, Michael—someone for the sale of the rest of your courses—I hope it wasn’t true, but I bleatedly thank you for whatever truth there was in the statement. Hope you’ve enjoyed my trip down memory lane. Have a good year.