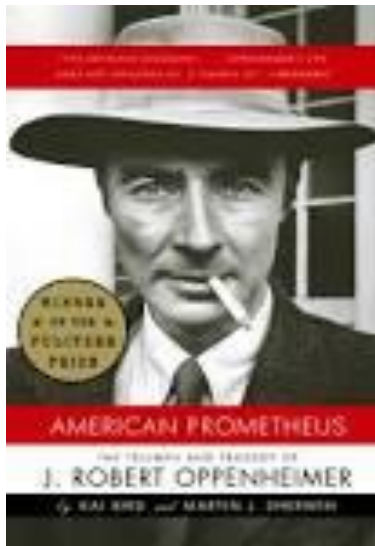


Oppenheimer and Northfield

[originally prepared for my students in Kyoto, lightly edited January 2025.]

The Kyoto Program had one day in Hiroshima. The students went to the Peace Park and the museum that is there. But I wanted to give the students more information about the bombing, including the events leading up to it and some of the consequences. So for about ten years I read as much as I could and built a fairly elaborate powerpoint presentation. One of my most important resources, next to Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy*, was the brilliant biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer *American Prometheus* by Martin Sherwin and Carleton alumnus Kai Bird (Class of 1973, history major, married a Carl, Susan Goldmark, also class of 1973 history major).



Bird and Sherwin recount how, in 1926, Oppenheimer traveled to Göttingen, Germany, where he met many German physicists, including Werner Heisenberg, who would later head up the German bomb project, and a Dutch-Austrian-German physicist Friedrich Georg Houtermans, known as “Fritz”.



Heisenberg



Houtermans

Also in Göttingen was a brilliant physics student, Charlotte Riefenstahl.

Oppie (as Oppenheimer was known) and Fritz were both in love with Charlotte, and both seriously courted her. But Oppenheimer was homesick, and chose to leave for the US. He threw a going-away party for himself, and “among many others, the lovely dark-haired Charlotte Riefenstahl came to say goodbye” (Bird and Sherwin, p.68). Oppie gave her a suitcase, the suitcase she had earlier admired and which had led to their meeting, which she named, “The Oppenheimer”. She kept it for three decades.

Charlotte would later teach at Vassar College, but she returned to Germany and in 1931 married Fritz. They fled Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933. They went to England, and then the Soviet Union. Fritz was imprisoned by the Russians, but Charlotte escaped to England, and then to the US.

Beginning in 1940, she taught at Wellesley College.

One night I was reading Bird and Sherwin’s biography of Oppenheimer, and I decided to try to find a picture of Charlotte. So, naturally, I went to Wikipedia, and here’s what I found:

Charlotte Houtermans born: Charlotte Riefenstahl (24 May 1899 in Bielefeld, Germany – 6 January 1993 in Northfield, Minnesota, United States) was a German physicist.

Wait, What? I wondered whether this was one of those weird internet things where google knows I’m in Northfield and so gratuitously inserts this location. But on further research, it turned out to be true. Charlotte really was in Northfield.

Charlotte had come to Northfield in 1986, to be close to her daughter, Giovanna Fjelstad. Giovanna was here because she married a St. Olaf math professor Paul Fjelstad. They were divorced, and he died in 2013, but Giovanna stayed in Northfield.

As I was reading this, my wife Angelique was sitting in the same room with me, and I told her this story. She opened her computer and in a few minutes, she told me that she and Giovanna had a mutual friend on Facebook. So Angelique wrote to that friend, and told her the whole story.

The friend wrote back almost immediately. She knew Giovanna well. She said it would be wonderful for me to meet her, but just this very morning, Giovanna had a massive stroke, and was in the hospital. The doctors did not expect her to live more than a day or two. Here’s Corinne Smith’s message, printed here with her permission as well as Annika Fjelstad, Charlotte’s granddaughter.

Well, were Giovanna to live and be aware of the world, she would love to meet Mike, and you, and to tell the story of her family.

Some small details:

Her father was concerned about his safety in Germany in the early days of Hitler, so moved the family to Russia. Something there led him to be concerned there also (cannot recall details). For some reason, he was unable to leave, so sent the family (wife, Giovanna, younger brother) to England. From there they went to US.

Through their travels, they had an old suitcase that they called the Oppenheimer. At some point, Giovanna asked her mother why it was called that. She explained that Robert O had given it to them as they were headed to Russia. Giovanna was very excited when some recent (last 15 years) book came out and had a picture of her mother and the two children standing in a depot (I think) with the Oppenheimer.

At some point, family reunited, I think in Europe somewhere, but marriage was over. Giovanna's mother taught at Sarah Lawrence.

Family was quite poor.

I think younger brother went into physics also, so Giovanna chose route of math. Cannot recall how she met Paul. They had a wild and crazy life due to Paul eccentricities for years—here and sabbaticals in Europe. They divorced late in life.

Giovanna taught math part time at Olaf and Normandale. She has been a part of the Friends Meeting for years. She has always been pleased that, though her health and body have failed, her mind has continued onward. She has been frustrated in recent weeks that even with magnifying glass, she has difficulties reading.

She is a delightful person. The doctor yesterday, said he did not expect her to live more than 24 hours. Sadly, her daughter in the Twin Cities, her wife, and one of their two sons are in Glacier. As of yesterday, contact with them had not yet been achieved. Their other son was home and able to come down and be with her through the day. Her Northfield son was out of the country. The two other children were scheduled to arrive last night and this morning.

I regret that Mike is only now learning of her, because I know how rewarding it would have been for her to tell her story to him, and for him to have enough knowledge of that time to hold a good conversation with her about it.

(message from Giovanna's friend Corinne Smith to my wife Angelique, shared with you with Corinne's permission as well as Annika Fjelstad, Charlotte's granddaughter.)

Records/Nation

Wednesday, July 3, 2019

NORTHFIELD NEWS

OBITUARIES

Giovanna Ruth Fjelstad 1932-2019

NORTHFIELD—Fjelstad, Giovanna passed away June 20, 2019, following a stroke. Born in Berlin, she learned resilience early as her family faced Stalin's purges while living in the Ukraine. After many moves, she studied at Sarah Lawrence, earning a Master's in math at Harvard. She taught math in many settings including St. Catherine's and St. Olaf College. After living in Norway, Germany and Switzerland she settled in Northfield, Minnesota, where she pursued interests in weaving, spinning, gardening, learning languages, and reading. She is survived by her brother Jan; children Per



(Lu), Annika (Heather Ferguson), Kaj and Lars (Martha Richards); and grandchildren Ian, Soljan, Josiah and Gabe. Services have been held.



Charlotte with Fritz and probably Giovanna.