

# Remembering Mariella Sundstrom

Who might've won Solebury School's Above and Beyond Award in decades past? Surely this beloved teacher.

BY LAUREN ECKSTEIN



*She was a Hungarian baroness!*

*She traveled the world!*

*She spoke six languages!*

*Her family's art collection was looted by Nazis!*

*She was a model in the 1940s!*

The way former Solebury School students have described Mariella Sundstrom makes her sound nearly mythical. Add to this list her steely gray bun, commanding voice, woolen suits and her encyclopedic knowledge of history and art, and she begins to seem like some sort of fictional grand dame from an epic film. Yet this storied teacher is not just a piece of Solebury apocrypha. She was real. And she was beloved.

"I think she was like a cultured, very smart and worldly aunt or grandmother one would always wish for," said Brett Webber '85. "She had this Anna Karenina life. She lived this incredibly wild journey and was sharing this window into another world with us."

Mariella Sundstrom, known as "Mala" by many, taught art history and ancient history at Solebury School from 1966 to 1985. Born in 1914, she was, in fact, a refined Hungarian baroness. Her family's art collection was, indeed, stolen by the Nazis. She did work as a model in New York City. And she brought a lifetime of traveling, culture, learning and sophistication to Solebury School, which she generously shared with her devoted students.

Yet while these facts are all true, there was something to Mariella Sundstrom that also seems larger than life. Former students recalled a teacher who was demanding and serious, yet

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whose praise could make them feel that they were standing in the warm glow of the sun. They talked about a woman who was refined and who could fix her own car. They talked of Mariella's old stone farmhouse that featured gilded European armchairs as well as quaint artwork she made out of seashells. They admired the woman with the flawless handwriting, who made her own clothes, was an impressive cook, and who was never, ever seen in slacks. Yet most of all, students spoke about how this remarkable woman left an imprint on them that was significant and lasting.

"She was infectious in the way she talked about art and architecture," said Brett, an architect who recently returned to Solebury School's Board of Trustees. "She made it exciting, exotic and interesting. She helped solidify my path in college."

Brett said he can still remember sitting in Mariella's darkened classroom as

she scrolled through her collection of incredible, curated art slides, and spoke with wisdom and anecdotal detail about each one. "I may be a romantic, but I always liked being in that dark room, clicking through the slides as she told stories around them," he said.

He is not the only one who is transported back to that dark, quiet room at the mention of Mariella Sundstrom's name. "The lights would go off, the slides would go on, and she would show one masterpiece after another. It was just magical," said Tom Hunt '74 P'16. Tom was a devoted student who also became a colleague and friend of Mariella's when he returned to Solebury School as a teacher in 1982. He recalled the woman who insisted on teaching him German, who demanded that he not indulge in nonsense with her charmingly delivered phrase, "Darling, you're being ridiculous," and the woman who invited him to her home, where Mariella's delicious cooking

was only overshadowed by the vibrant dinner conversation. "I can't overstate how lovely it was to be invited over for dinner," Tom recalled. "As seniors, she loved to introduce us to formal, brilliant table conversation. People who had no clue about the dinner party would learn about conversations that rambled far and wide where you don't want to leave. That's what it was like being with her."

Many students recalled being invited to Mariella's house for a meal. Jonathan Keep '85 remembered going with another student to discuss their 20-page papers. "In a Julia Child way, she would talk to us about our projects while cooking this incredible French meal," said Jonathan. "There are those teachers who understand that it's more than what just goes on in the classroom."

In the classroom, Mariella was described as a demanding teacher who pushed her students to work hard. Her classes were challenging, yet former students said that





Mariella's raising of the bar only inspired them to jump that much higher. "You literally lived to please the woman," said Alexandra Bader '85. "Okay, I lived to please her, but I think others felt the same way. You wanted her to connect with you – you wanted to be the teacher's pet and you knew if you were diligent, honest and smart, you could be."

***"When I think back, I know she wanted to innately instill in us life qualities that we would use after we left Solebury... I believe I am diligent, honest and smarter because of Mariella."***

Many former students remarked that Mariella's intelligence, sophistication and expertise introduced them to the kind of breadth, depth and rigor not often seen at the high school level. "She taught us to really look at things and analyze them. Once that's engaged, it's like a light going on," said Sarah McPhee '78, an art history professor at Emory College. "Mala was not cozy. She was formidable. She could scare you, but also praise you and make you feel you had really done well, so you worked for her. In her art history class, I wrote a long paper – I still have it – on the self-portraits of Rembrandt. It's unbelievable in high school to write a 50-page paper on the portraiture of Rembrandt and its role in history."

Yet for Sarah, what she remembers most about Mala is how real she was. She wasn't just teaching her prescribed content, she was imparting what she had experienced. "We saw how she really lived history," said Sarah. "At this small school in rural Pennsylvania, she gave us a taste of



European sophistication. We were at the knee of someone who lived it, and that was the most compelling thing in the world."

Pat Rubin '69 agreed that Mariella's whole character infused her classes with authenticity. "It was a refinement and deep intelligence," said Pat, the director of The Fine Arts Institute at New York University where she is also a professor of art history. "She was very cultured in a real sense and not a pretend sense. Some people show off what they know. She was just it."

Mariella Sundstrom died in 2000, yet her legacy lives on. In her 19 years as a teacher at Solebury School she influenced countless students in countless ways. At the mention of her name, former students seem flooded with memories of the woman who taught them about art

and history, yet so many other ineffable, intangible things. She broadened her students' frame of reference and encouraged them to travel, see everything, drink it in, and grow from their own experiences. In life, people often talk about "those teachers," those exceptional, singular, nearly mythical teachers whose impact is deep and significant. For many students, and for 19 years, Mala was one of those teachers.

"There are teachers who go beyond," said Jonathan. "They understand the humanitarian impulse to educate and realize that they have this opportunity to influence a young mind. They really understand that it's an obligation and a privilege to share their learning. In your life, there will be one or two or maybe three teachers. She was like that. She was really wonderful." 📖