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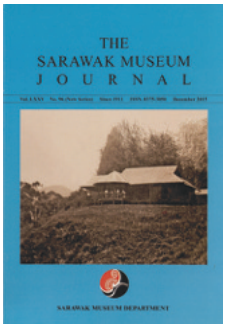

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OBITUARY: Barbara Harrisson, PhD (1922-2015): an appreciation by friends

Earl of Cranbrook

Dr. Barbara Harrisson, who died aged 93 on 26th December 2015 of complications following a heart attack, at her home in Jelsum, The Netherlands, had a life of dramatic incident and multiple achievements, at least equalling those of her two divorced husbands. Professor Emeritus Dr Eberhard Briinig and the late Tom Harrisson OBE, former Curator ofthe Sarawak Museum, Malaysia. She is mourned by many friends and colleagues, especially by kindly neighbours in Friesland, The Netherlands, her last home, and a cohort of the new generation of archaeologists of South-East Asia who benefited from her detailed field records and publications, followed by her later encouragement in the reassembly of results of the great excavations at Niah caves, Sarawak, where she worked voluntarily during 1957-1965 with her second husband and the Sarawak Museum archaeological team.

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Jabatan Muzium Sarawak

OBITUARY

Barbara Harrisson, PhD (1922-2015): an appreciation by friends

Dr Barbara Harrisson, who died aged 93 on 26th December 2015 of complications following a heart attack, at her home in Jelsum, The Netherlands, had a life of dramatic incident and multiple achievements, at least equalling those of her two divorced husbands, Professor Emeritus Dr Eberhard Brünig and the late Tom Harrisson OBE, former Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Malaysia. She is mourned by many friends and colleagues, especially by kindly neighbours in Friesland, The Netherlands, her last home, and a cohort of the new generation of archaeologists of South-East Asia who benefited from her detailed field records and publications, followed by her later encouragement in the reassembly of results of the great excavations at Niah caves, Sarawak, where she worked voluntarily during 1957-1965 with her second husband and the Sarawak Museum archaeological team.

Barbara Veronika Gertrud Maria Elisabeth was born on 20th May 1922, the daughter of Gerhard Güttler, then owner of the only operating goldmine in Germany, and his wife Clara née Hasselbach (the brewers of Hasselbach Beer), at Reichenstein, Schlesien (Silesia). Barbara was proud of her family heritage. In 2008, after the death of her last brother, the only one (of three) who survived World War II, she wrote a memoir of the seven generations descended from the illiterate farmer who had served under Frederic the Great in 1750s, to her father, a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and her own life and achievements. In this she described herself as a curiosity, at 85, with her sight fading, the oldest surviving twig of a 250-year family tree.[1]

In 1927, the prosperous middle-class family of Güttler settled into their town house in Kőnigstrasse, Berlin, to provide better education for their children. Barbara went to the local gymnasium and High School (*Abitur*) followed by finishing school and, in 1941, university, where she studied art history and languages for a year until drafted into the armed forces as a secretary/typist. Her language qualifications led to a posting with the *Abwehr* (German Military Intelligence) in occupied Paris, on the staff of Admiral Wilhelm Canaris. When he was subsequently accused of treachery, she was also interviewed. Canaris was executed by the Nazis in the final weeks of the War. Barbara was cleared, but sent as a telephonist to the eastern front where the Russians were advancing at a great rate. One night, sleeping on a canvas bed by the telephone, she was woken silently by an intelligence colleague who whispered into her ear, "If you want to live, come with me. You have 30 seconds to decide. Bring nothing." They left in his car on snowy roads (he knew where the German and Russian guns were). At the outskirts of the town, in pitch darkness, he stopped and told her it was too dangerous to drive further and she should walk across the fields until she met a road full of refugees, and to join them. She got back to Berlin and her parents; he didn't.[2] When the War finally engulfed Berlin, as Barbara herself related, always flat-chested, she avoided the attentions of rampaging Russian soldiers by cutting her hair and dressing as a boy. Cleared of Nazi affiliation, she was subsequently employed as interpreter and secretary in the Allied *IG-Farben Entflechtung* office in Frankfurt am Main. But by then the family home, being in Silesia east of the western branch of the Neisse river, was incorporated into Poland by agreements at Potsdam and Yalta and, as the Iron Curtain fell, was on the eastern side.

During the War, Barbara had been engaged, briefly, to an army Lieutenant; but he was killed on the Eastern Front. Her first husband, Eberhard Brünig, was a member of a traditional landed Prussian family of East-Friesian origin. His wartime military service had culminated as a *Fahnenjunker-Oberjäger* (*Offiziersanwärter* = Officer Cadet) in the prestigious, politically non-conforming *Gebirgsjägerregiment* (Mountaineer Regiment) 136, Innsbruck, with frontline service in Yugoslavia and at the Italian-French border. Captured, he was a British Prisoner of War in Italy from June to October 1945 when he was released. In 1947, during a pre-university practical training course in forest management (*Forsteinrichtung*) near Helmstedt, he helped a young lady — an unknown stranger — to cross the barbed-wired barrier. She was, with good reason, much relieved when she realised that he was not a Russian Border Guard. In 1950, in a bus from Mittenwald to Garmisch, Eberhard protected a young lady sitting next to him from verbal molestation by a bunch of GIs. The next day they met again, skiing on the slopes of the Alpspitze and, over lunch at the mountain hut, discovered their original encounter in 1947. Their civil