

Ellen L. Kohler

BY GARETH
DARBYSHIRE

AT GORDION I was told that, if ever I managed to visit the Gordion Archive in the Penn Museum, it would be a good idea to look up Ellen Kohler. One of the Gordion “originals,” she was the oracle of the Rodney S. Young excavation

era, the genius of the project’s Archive, the savior of the artifacts, and the authority on the Iron Age tumulus burials. However, it seemed unlikely I would ever discuss Gordion with her, for Philadelphia lay far away, and Ellen was already in her eighties and struggling with poor health. She was virtually blind, hard of hearing, and walked only with great difficulty. I had also heard that she could be pretty stern. Never did I imagine that I would be allowed entry into her private world, and that we would become close friends over the last four years of her life.

Eventually, I was able to study in the Gordion Archive and, to my surprise, discovered that the fabled “El Bayan” (as she was nicknamed in Turkish) was still making it into the Museum to work, unhappily accommodated in a ground floor office because she could no longer manage the steps up to her beloved Archive. We clicked immediately. She had outlived her old familiar world and friends, and had become isolated. But in her winter years—

probably to her own surprise—she was brought in from the cold of indifference to enjoy a final circle of camaraderie. This group included her “life care” helper and friend, Sue Parker, and me, as well as a small but dedicated band of volunteer research assistants whom she appreciated greatly. There was never a dull moment, and we all learned from her.

Wherever she was, her towering presence filled the room. Sitting in her big red chair, sporting her trademark baseball cap, holding a large cup of ice water, and reading with the aid of a magnifying monitor, Ellen battled against all the odds to wrap up her second volume on the Iron Age tumuli. Her resilience was marvelous.

When she realized I was present she would speak out in her clear voice (woe betide anyone who mumbled), “Hey! What’s



Ellen Kohler with Rodney Young at the Penn Museum, 1950.



Ellen Kohler working at Gordion.

up Kiddo?” My new name! She always referred to herself as “Kohler” and was highly amused that Rodney Young had mischievously corrupted it to “Ghouler” (I imagined it was spelled like this, but she didn’t seem to know). She was like a teenage girl always ready for a laugh. Our many conversations—in her office, on the phone, at her home, struggling down dark corridors, waiting for transit vans, or in hospital waiting rooms—demonstrated Ellen’s phenomenal memory, the companion of her method. For almost 60 years she had lived and breathed

Gordion. She had many other interests, but these were squeezed into Gordion’s tight interstices. Her admiration of Rodney Young was always apparent. She celebrated his greatness and revealed his warm, humorous side. Perhaps she understood him better than anyone. Certainly, theirs was a highly effective working partnership, and clearly for her the good far outweighed Young’s eccentricities.

As I grew familiar with the Archive, I encountered Ellen’s handiwork everywhere. She and the Gordion project merged into one. Her efforts had safeguarded the integrity of the excavation records for posterity, and many times I said to myself, “Thank God for Kohler.” But she herself would not or could not acknowledge her centrality to the Archive; she was too modest, a lovably exasperating aspect of her character. Yet, at the very end, for the first time she conceded, “Do you really think so? You’ve made me so happy!”

With Sue Parker and me for company, Ellen died peacefully on November 3, 2008, at Bryn Mawr Terrace nursing home, a young 91. A great era had quietly ended. It was then that Sue pointed out something I had never thought about—Ellen didn’t really know what we looked like! It hit me and then we laughed, for she knew us very well indeed. 🏠

GARETH DARBYSHIRE *is the Gordion Archivist at the Penn Museum.*