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A Pressed Flower and Woman of Valor

The essence of this loving portrait of Marie Syrkin, an extraordinary woman of letters and political activity in the American Zionist movement, is captured photographically on the book’s cover. It pictures Ms. Syrkin in the pose of an ingénue wearing a straw hat bedecked with a flowered rim. One’s first impression is that of a frivolous and playful young woman preparing for a frolic at a beach resort in the 1920’s. Her dark captivating eyes, however, portray a steely and self-assured Jewish soul determined to make a major contribution to her beloved adopted country, America, and to her traditional roots in Zion.

Professor Kessner, herself a distinguished academician, is almost too close to her subject. As one begins the book, much of it based on personal and private communications, one may be provoked to apprehension that this tome is going to be little more than an overly romanticized tale based on intimate dialogue between the author and the subject. That would be a grave error. Professor Kessner has produced a well documented, albeit sympathetic, portrayal of a woman who emerged from a very difficult, penurious, and peripatetic childhood to become an intellectual and a formidable political figure. Kessner demonstrates Syrkin’s profound influence on the thinking of Golda Meir and other secular labor Zionists in the United States and Israel with carefully crafted and economic prose. Syrkin emerges as a clear eyed partisan, yet distancing herself enough from her own comrades to evince more than a little disappointment that the modern state of Israel in the late twentieth century. Syrkin notes it failed to fully realize the dreams of secular labor Zionism and fell victim to the heirs of the revisionists, nationalists, and the anti-feminist tenets of old school Orthodox martinets. The failure of the Labor party after the 1973 War and the rise of the right wing/Haredi alliances must have been a bitter pill.

Kessner divides her book into two parts, both untitled, suggesting that there were metaphorically two Marie Syrkins. The first was dominated by her historical roots, which were dictated mainly by the male protagonists of the Zionist movement, particularly her father, but also her husbands. The second was Syrkin speaking in her own voice with a stern determination to see the secular socialist Zionist dream through to its conclusion. The first part of the book is written with such empathy for the emotional, psychological, romantic and tragic origins of the first decades of her life that at times the reader may feel almost embarrassed by the more intimate details. Do we really need to know, for example, the date and place of the consummation of her one-day long marriage with her first husband, Maurice Samuels? Marie Syrkin’s early life was dominated by the intermittent attention of her overbearing but loving father, Nachman. He took over the exclusive task of childrearing after his wife and partner in politics, Bassaya, Syrkin’s mother, contracted tuberculosis, and died when Marie was a young child. Nachman was not unkind to his daughter, but his attention was easily diverted to political matters. He was entirely secular, a gifted writer and a student of the classical texts that underlay secular socialism. As Kessner so aptly observed:

“Because of the death of her mother, psychobiography must take into account Marie’s love-hatred for her father, who was an erudite ethical idealist, yet possessed of a blazing temperament that vented itself publicly in scathing argument and privately (as Marie Syrkin herself has described it) in a zealous “dedicated hardship” (Memoir 153). (11-12).
Nachman took the matter of his daughter’s education into his own hands as they drifted from Russia through Europe and eventually to America in the Bronx section of New York City. Rather than settle for the standard American fare offered at P.S. 130, Nachman steeped his daughter in Marx in German and Spinoza in Latin at home. Interestingly, he began to teach her Bible in Hebrew, but failed to follow through in that language, a fact that Marie claimed to have held against him forever.

The second part of the book is a much more straightforward historical account of the vicissitudes of both her efforts and failure to provide a secular Zionist solution to ‘the Jewish problem’ leading up to, through and in the wake of the Shoah. Of course, no one else succeeded fully in this endeavor either. One major accomplishment of Syrkin, explicated thoroughly by Kessner, is Syrkin’s role in detailing the heroic and tragic career of Hannah Senesz in Syrkin’s *Blessed is the Match*. The young Hungarian Jewish paratrooper who had immigrated to Palestine earlier, died leading a botched attempt by the British army to rally Hungarian Jewry in the closing days of much of the Hungarian Jewish community’s existence. Kessner may have pulled her punches a bit on this subject, for the naiveté of Senesz and her personal interest in her own family’s situation likely contributed to the failure of the mission and Senesz’s own demise. Yet the book was instrumental in obtaining a teaching appointment for Syrkin at Brandeis University in 1950 and led to another important study, an authorized biography of Golda Meir, which helped her achieved tenure, despite the fact she never gained a doctoral degree.

Marie’s marriages are also artfully and empathetically described. The sense one gets from Kessner is that while they were not without romance and affection, they were almost as much political alliances around secular socialist Zionism as they were traditional couplings, whatever that might mean in such turbulent times.

One of the interesting episodes in Syrkin’s career was her role in condemning the publication by a fellow female intellectual of towering stature, Hannah Arendt. Mainly, Syrkin attacked Arendt’s account of the Israeli trial of Adolph Eichmann, arguably a pivotal figure in the Final Solution. Eichmann was, no doubt, a senior administrator of the Shoah, but it is still a matter of some debate as to whether he had a key ideological or political role in initiating the Shoah. He was not in Hitler’s inner circle, as much as he may have wished to be. Arendt was making the intellectual point that Eichmann was a willing functionary, along with thousands of ‘everyday’ Germans. Syrkin missed this nuance and tries to portray Arendt as exonerating Eichmann. The exact opposite was the case. Arendt was indicting Eichmann for his mindless complicity along with the other members of the mass hysteria that gripped Germany. Arendt argued that Eichmann’s failure to think about the moral content of his actions was an even more evil crime than his enthusiastic participation in a nationally disgraceful act.

Syrkin was hardly alone. Indeed, the majority of the left wing of American Jewish intelligentsia joined her invective-filled attacks. Syrkin singled out two aspects of Arendt’s reportage on the Eichmann trial for particular attack. One was Arendt’s discussion of the complicity of local Jewish leaders with the Nazis in providing for the orderly transport of Jews to their death and the lack of Jewish resistance. The second was Syrkin’s and many others’ perception of a lack of sympathy or love [ahavath Israel] or empathy for the impossibility of Jewish resistance. Both charges are understandable in light of the propinquity of the events of the Shoah and the lack of historical information at the time. They also reveal an ignorance of Arendt’s trans-national philosophy, shared, by the way, by Martin Buber and even the youthful David Ben-Gurion. The facts surrounding some of the arguably self-serving acts by some East European Jews and Arendt’s own urging of the organization of a Jewish army to resist the Nazis were either unknown or ignored by Syrkin and her colleagues. After all, Arendt escaped Nazi Germany and an internment camp while many of her close friends, such as Walter Benjamin, were victims of Shoah. She was hardly sympathetic to the Nazis.
Syrkin’s Manichean judgments about Arendt’s intent in writing the book are oblivious to Arendt’s major thrust concerning the dangers of inaction in the face of overwhelming evil by both the perpetrators and even somewhat, at least some of the victims. The failure to resist was not as widespread as Arendt or Syrkin may have known at the time of their exchanges. Furthermore, it is undeniable, although unpleasant to acknowledge, that at least some Jews did try to survive or at least delay their demise at the expense of their co-religionists. Additionally, Arendt showed early revisionist skepticism about the Israeli Government’s simultaneous demand that the international Nuremberg precedents be applied to Eichmann, albeit in a strictly Israeli legal setting. This legal theory requires a least some justification beyond the ‘special status’ of crimes against Jews. Despite Kellner’s failure to hold Syrkin to a stricter account on these two aspects, this is a fascinating and informative account of the life and times of one of the most important American Jewish activists, poets, and writers who made extraordinary contributions to her adopted homeland and Israel, her homeland in her heart. It is an especially welcome addition to the history of secular egalitarian Zionism in the twentieth Century.