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Abstract

Dorothy Rodgers, wife of the famous playwright/composer Richard Rodgers, was well-known as an inventor, designer, author, businesswoman, fund raiser, philanthropist and art collector. But not many people know that she was also a social and political activist in her own way, who wrote thousands of letters to influential people such as presidents, governors, congressmen, mayors, journalists, television hosts and company executives, fighting against anti-Semitism, demanding to correct all kinds of wrongs and stop wars, and making useful suggestions for improving life in America. Most of her letters were answered, and a considerable number of them led to some action by their recipients.

Most Americans, and many other Westerners, have heard of Rodgers and Hammerstein, the twentieth century’s playwrights and composers. Dorothy Feiner Rodgers, Richard Rodgers’ wife, is less known. Traditionally, she is portrayed as a rich socialite who basked in her husband’s glory. While this account is accurate, it is limited. Dorothy Rodgers was also a very talented woman: an inventor, author, philanthropist, volunteer, designer, business entrepreneur, art collector, host – all of which have been mentioned in books about her husband, in interviews with her, and in newspaper articles about her during her lifetime. What is hardly ever mentioned is the fact that she was also a devout social/political activist in her own way, as will be shown below.

Very little research has been conducted on Dorothy Rodgers, perhaps because nobody has expected to find anything particularly interesting about her. Tobin Belzer’s article, “A Jewish Identity at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class: Dorothy Feiner Rodgers,”4 is the sole scholarly piece dedicated to her. Her article presents Rodgers in a positive light, describing her talents, social activities and battle against anti-Semitism. Contrary to Belzer, Meryle Secrest's book Somewhere for Me: A Biography of Richard Rodgers,5 presents a rather negative portrait of her. Drawing on previously unstudied materials – Dorothy Rodgers's papers and letters in Schlesinger Library6 – I will attempt to give a fuller and more accurate account of this fascinating woman. Her correspondence with politicians, eminent personalities, and others, as well as documents such as newspaper clippings, depict Rodgers as a much more positive, complex, politically involved and caring person than is traditionally presented. These documents show her as a woman who cared greatly about her co-religionists, Jews, her city, New York, her state, her country, individuals whom she did not even know and, contrary to some views, about her family. Rodgers did not pay lip service to the issues that bothered her, but put an enormous amount of work in writing letters and trying to improve matters. The correspondence reflecting her concern for all these issues will be described below.

I. Dorothy Rodgers’s Fight against Anti-Semitism (1969-1985)7

Despite a partially traditional upbringing, Rodgers was not a practicing Jew. She married an atheist and did not celebrate the Jewish holidays. Still she maintained a strong Jewish identity, evident in her letters attacking anti-Semitic incidents and in

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her involvement in the Jewish Museum and in the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

Few people would make an issue of every small or subtle anti-Semitic remark that was mentioned in the media. Rodgers was an exception: she seems to have battled at every opportunity. She not only wrote letters, but also withdrew financial support on occasion. Examples of such letters include one written in 1969 to Dr. Harold Taylor, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the WBAI radio program, complaining about a poem written by Mr. Campbell which had been broadcast in one of his radio’s programs, which contained an anti-Semitic remark criticizing Hitler's failure "to make enough Jews into lampshades;" a letter from 1974 to President Ford thanking him for rebuking General George S. Brown after the latter's shocking anti-Semitic remarks, and urging the President to re-consider his decision to retain the general in a position of authority; and a letter from 1977 to Oscar Cohen (official of Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith), expressing her concern about what she perceived as anti-Semitic views expressed by President Carter in a Sunday school lesson. In some cases her attention to anti-Semitic subtleties may seem petty or even peculiar, as can be seen in her letter from 1982 to the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, complaining about the performance of a medieval passion play “Carmina Burana” because it included anti-Semitic lines such as "the crime of the hateful race of Jews," and a letter from 1985 to Stephen Sondheim (a musical and film composer and lyricist who was a friend of Richard Rodgers) about a joke he had made on a newly fashionable game about Jews, which she regarded as anti-Semitic.

Rodgers received answers to these letters, expressing acceptance of her criticism and promises not to allow anti-Semitic remarks to be published again. But she failed to change the course of events in a more important event: on October 24, 1977 she wrote a letter to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Foundation in which she expressed her disappointment with the ACLU’s defense of the neo-Nazis’ right to march in Skokie, Illinois. In this letter she declared that she and her husband would no longer contribute to the organization. A long correspondence ensued, in which Aryeh Neier, the executive director of the foundation, tried to explain the foundation’s position and expressed his concern about the contribution they had been expecting from the Rodgers family, but Rodgers was adamant, replying: "Not now. We'll see what the foundation does in the future."

Rodgers acted as a vigilant watchdog for any comment that bore the slightest semblance of anti-Semitism. Her pattern of action was in many cases writing to a specific person who was in charge of the person who had made the anti-Semitic remark and, in addition, writing a copy of the same letter to the press – usually to The New York Times, the most highly circulated newspaper in New York. This tactic proved successful. Rodgers managed to cause some of the offenders to retract their anti-Semitic statements and perhaps in doing so prevented more expressions of anti-Semitic nature.

The Neo-Nazi march in Skokie was a clearly anti-Semitic act that “called for” an action to prevent it (and was protested against by many people). Other instances of a subtle expression of anti-Semitism that were mentioned before such as a line in a medieval play or a poor joke on the radio would probably be considered too trivial to elicit response from most people. It is puzzling why Rodgers, of all people, undertook the overwhelming task of being the anti-Semitism watchdog, especially in view of the fact that she was an assimilated Jew (her oldest daughter, Mary Rodgers Guettel,
converted to Catholicism in her twenties!), who did not belong to any Jewish congregation on a regular basis.

The answer could perhaps be found in the opening of a permanent multi-media exhibition tracing 4,000 years of Jewish history in the Jewish Museum, New York, in January 1985. The money for this project had been in part provided by the Richard and Dorothy Rodgers fund. In a report about the museum expansion, published on June 20, 1985 in *The Star Ledger*, Dorothy Rodgers remarked:

> I have a special pride in my Jewish heritage…I started to think about those many Jews who had lost their sense of connection with the past…I wanted to inform all kinds of people, Jews and non-Jews, about the achievements Jews had made to civilization over this 4,000-year period.\(^{14}\)

This quote seems to be saying something about Rodgers herself – the woman who had had very little connection with her own past but who gradually became more involved in Jewish affairs and, in the last years of her life, had a much stronger and prouder Jewish identity than ever before. At the age of 60, when she began this correspondence, Rodgers was a much more confident person than during her youth (as will be shown later on), with firmer views about how the world should run. No doubt her social position and wealth had contributed to her confidence, assertiveness and initiative in the correspondence, but there was probably some aspect of her personality that contributed to it.

In a speech she gave at the Jewish Museum dinner on May 29, 1985 (about a month before the report about the museum expansion) she mentioned three visits to Israel and said that these visits had led her to think about those Jews who had lost their sense of connection with the past\(^{15}\) (the same expression she used in her remark a month earlier). It may be that her visits to Israel intensified her sense of belonging to the Jewish culture and inspired her in her “crusade”. Seeing Jews living in Israel as proud citizens who never face any expression of anti-Semitism may have led her to expect or aspire for the same in her own homeland. But Rodgers did not confine herself to this task only. She also wanted to improve life in New York and led a vast correspondence with the city’s authorities in order to achieve this aim.

II. Correspondences about New York City (1967-1985)

Dorothy Rodgers lived in New York City most of her life and deeply cared for it. She took an active part in its cultural life by contributing to the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and the Metropolitan Museum and by helping establish the Jewish Museum. But she also expressed her love for the city through her correspondence with its authorities, particularly with the mayor, about issues that bothered her or that she thought should and could be improved. Few of her letters seem to stem from personal motives, such as the preservation of the park next to her home,\(^{16}\) but most of them do not betray any personal gain.

Examples include a letter from 1967 to August Heckscher, Administrator of Recreation and Cultural Affairs, in which she suggested the implementation of free concerts by the municipal opera (with profits for the city by retaining the concessions) three times a day in the park and at the zoo, so people would also see the animals.\(^{17}\) She maintained a correspondence from 1975 until 1981 regarding the proposed design for the new Wollman Skating Rink, which did not satisfy her taste.\(^{18}\)
Rodgers’ concern for New York City led her to recruit aid from her husband and take exceptional measures. On April 15, 1968 Dorothy and Richard Rodgers telegraphed President Lyndon B. Johnson and Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller about the urgent need to spend billions “to correct the desperate plight of our cities.”19 This is one of the rare letters that Dorothy wrote together with her husband. Almost all of her correspondence was hers alone, as Richard did not like to be involved, and seemed to have opposed such activity, as will be shown later on.

Having been impressed by Rodgers’ desire to be involved in the improvement of the city, the mayor appointed her to the board of trustees of the International House of New York City. In this role she continued writing letters to senators and other officials about ways to improve the city's revenues20 and cut pollution,21 as well as ways of raising money for the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Arts,22 and her opposition to the legalization of Casino gambling in New York.23 This appointment provided her with the opportunity and a position of authority to address social and political issues through her correspondence.

It is interesting to note that although Rodgers herself never needed daycare centers, she understood their importance for working women, as evidenced from her correspondence with the mayor about the issue in 1972 and in 1975.24

Rodgers was concerned not only with improvements but also with people’s attitude towards the city: she did not tolerate insults. In 1976 she expressed her anger at TV star Merv Griffin for his negative attitude toward New York City as expressed in his television program, and succeeded in convincing him to come to New York to give ten shows of his program from the city.25

We thus see that Rodgers displayed her concern about the cultural life of the city, its aesthetic appearance, its security (by asking for more lights), the morality and health of its citizens (alcoholism, gambling, and pollution) and the ways the municipality could increase its revenues and help working mothers. Like her letters concerning anti-Semitism, those dealing with issues concerning New York City were responded to and respected by her recipients, and no doubt this fact encouraged her to keep writing. One might argue that if her husband had not been so famous, Dorothy Rodgers’ letters would not have been treated the way they were. Assuming that this was true, Rodgers deserves credit for making a very good use of her husband’s fame by harnessing it for public good and not for personal gain.

III. Correspondences about New York State (1967-1985)

Dorothy Rodgers’ interest in New York State is obvious in view of the fact that she was a member of the New York State Council of the Arts for 17 years (1963-1979). She received this nomination because of her commitment to promoting the arts and involvement in the New York museums. But in addition, she wrote letters to the governor when she came across issues, mostly social, that concerned her.

She conducted a vast correspondence with many levels of officials requiring better communication between state hospitals and the public26 (an issue that was sparked by her own frustrating attempt to locate a person in a state hospital) and promoting other medical issues.27

In 1972 she urged New York State Assemblyman Anthony G. Olivieri to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment by New York State.28 This reflects her support of equality between men and women (which she did not maintain at home, in her relationship with her husband, as will be shown later). She also wanted to solve the problem of
children without foster care, as can be seen in her letter from 1973, addressed to Senator Goodman, with copies to assemblymen in New York State and to the counsel to the Governor.29

The correspondence with New York State authorities does not seem to have yielded many responses, compared to her other correspondences (or perhaps there were responses but they are not in the files), yet this probably did not deter Rodgers from continuing to write her letters for many years. One cannot avoid thinking how the citizens' lives would improve if many more people acted as vigorously. The New York State correspondence is the only one out of the four types of correspondence which was the work not only of a private citizen but a citizen with an official recognition by the state. This may have made Rodgers more confident in her other correspondence about national matters, described below.

IV. Correspondences about National Issues (1965-1985)

The greatest part of Dorothy Rodgers' correspondence is addressed to representatives and senators, vice-presidents and presidents on issues such as the proper administration of government, free speech, U.S.A. foreign policy, as well as social and environmental issues.30

Rodgers’ main concern was the proper running of government. She corresponded with Congressman John V. Lindsay and with senators about several aspects of this issue, including the impeachment proceedings against President Nixon31 and the determination of a president's disability.32

The issue of free speech, one of the most important tenets of democracy, bothered her too, as can be seen in her letter from 1973 to seven senators.33 In this letter she expressed her concern about the Administration's attacks against television broadcast, the news and the press, and protested against the imprisonment of reporters for refusing to divulge their sources.

Another concern of Rodgers was economic issues, particularly social security paid to non-citizens who return to their countries when they retire;34 the Energy Conservation Bill and the improvement of public transport.35 She was also bothered by Pan American Airline’s financial problems and in her letter to Ed Koch from 1974 she wrote: "I know I bombard you with letters, but there are so many problems today [italics mine, SK] and in this case, I am uncertain as to where I should direct my concern for Pan Am."36 The sentence speaks for itself. Rodgers took all the problems she corresponded about to her heart and tried to find solutions. This is remarkable in view of the fact that she was a private citizen and not a politician or public figure.

Rodgers was also keenly interested in ‘economic-socio-medical’ issues. She suggested improvements in Medicare and Medicaid,37 corresponded with Congresswoman Elizabeth Holtzman about reimbursement of doctors' bills,38 and suggested that hospitals should work on a seven-day week basis, which would, she believed, save costs.39

We have seen earlier that few of Rodgers’ suggestions to the New York City Municipality were driven by personal gain. The same is true about a correspondence on a federal issue she had with congressmen and senators for a decade (1975-1985). In her letters, she expressed her objection to the proposed amendment in copyright laws that would decrease royalties of writers and musicians, such as her husband. No evidence of success in this attempt was found in her files. But the intensity of this
correspondence and the length of time it took suggest that the issue was very important to her.

Unlike most women of her time, Rodgers was also interested in, and tried to affect, foreign policy, which included her request from presidents to stop the bombing in North Vietnam and Cambodia and her "indignation at the revelations of US government-sponsored activities in the internal affairs of Chile," among other issues.

Social issues concerned Rodgers greatly. Examples include a letter to Congressman Ed Koch from 1975 where she expressed her concern about a children's temporary shelter on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, a suggestion to the Secretary of Transportation to improve mass transportation in the country, and a rebuke of Coca Cola because of the shameful conditions of migrant workers in Florida as portrayed in a NBC documentary.

Rodgers’ interest in welfare is evident from her letters about many issues relating to the elderly, those in need of Medicaid, the poor, welfare recipients and the unemployed. In her letters she made useful suggestions, such as distributing surplus produce to those in need instead of keeping it in costly storage.

Another social issue Rodgers fought for was racial equality, as reflected from her letter to Phil Donahue criticizing his TV program for promoting bigotry, hatred and hostility.

Environmental problems on the national scale, just as those of New York City, also interested Rodgers. Among them were the problem of recycling of empty bottles, the potential hazard to the environment of the trans-Alaska pipeline, the Clean Air Act, energy conservation and the nuclear fallout problem.

Finally, her love of culture, particularly the visual arts, ran through all her books and many of her correspondences. She did not have any scruples about writing letters to President Carter and to senators, in which she expressed her dismay at the magnitude of cuts the President had proposed for the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts.

Like her correspondence about other issues, Rodgers received many replies to her letters from their recipients with promises for change. For example, the Coca Cola company responded to Rodgers’ rebuke (and personal boycott of their drinks) by improving the conditions of their workers and notified Rodgers about the change. But Rodgers answered them that the changes they had made were insufficient and that she would avoid buying Coca Cola until their workers’ work conditions were equal to those of other American workers.

One may question the source of Rodgers’ “audacity” to give advice on national issues and to tell senators, congressmen, vice presidents and presidents how to run the country. Not many women were involved in politics at the time of her correspondence, so being a woman could be another factor that should have deterred her from doing her one-woman lobbying. In addition, those women who did get into politics (see examples in section VI) usually came from a different social milieu than that of Dorothy Rodgers. Rodgers was an exceptionally courageous, intrepid woman. Her commitment may have stemmed from the fact that she grew up in a rich, well-connected family which raised her with full awareness of her status, and from her marriage to a famous man through whom she met many influential people. These circumstances were probably crucial in driving her to offer her unsolicited advice to all ranks of politicians. But social milieu alone cannot explain her crusades. There
must have been something else that drove her to act, in spite of her husband’s resentment.

V. Attempting to Explain Rodgers' Motives

Dorothy Rodgers' correspondence from the years 1965 to 1985 shows twenty years of unremitting efforts to improve the quality of life in America. During those years she published three books, co-wrote a monthly magazine column with her daughter Mary, and served as an active member of committees and volunteer organizations. She did all this while coping with her husband’s long absences from home, constant unfaithfulness, health problems, alcoholism and ultimate death. Why did she invest so much time and effort in these letters, especially in view of the fact that she always wanted to please her husband who did not approve of her activism?54 There is no clear answer, but her writings provide some valuable insight. She wrote in her 1977 autobiography:

To this wildly catholic list of activities I must add my career as a one-woman lobby on anything and everything [my emphasis] that I can feel strongly about. I write to newspaper editors, heads of corporations, politicians at all levels – from a member of the city council to the President of the United States. Whenever Dick hears me say I'm going to write one of my letters, I can almost see him wince. He doesn't like to become involved – and I can't bear not to when I care deeply about something.55

This could be an important clue to understanding Dorothy Rodgers' unique correspondence. She admits that she cannot refrain from writing, even though her husband is opposed to this activity. It may be that part of her motivation to act was her caring about “anything and everything”, but it may also be that another part of her writing stemmed from her subconscious wish to assert her own independence, even if it meant defying her husband. Richard Rodgers' marriage to Dorothy, characterized by his frequent extramarital affairs, was not happy. As a young woman, Dorothy always wanted to please her husband and was extremely upset when he was angry with her. As a middle-aged woman, having suffered from his repeated affairs, she may have chosen this occupation as an act of defiance, although at the same time she still cared about him and about their marriage. The fact that this activism started when Dorothy was fifty-six, and not before, seems to support this suggestion.

Another explanation for her correspondence is that it may have been an important outlet for her many talents, which were never fully realized in various aforementioned pursuits. The correspondence afforded her a degree of influence and enabled her to contribute to society. The responses she received to many of her letters, and the changes and improvements they generated, evidently encouraged her to keep writing. In addition, it could be suggested that she had political inclinations and skills, and these filtered through to her correspondence. Timing may have been another factor. Her involvement in political issues began in the 1960’s (and not before), a decade rife with civil dissension, growing social awareness and activism. The civil rights movement, the second wave of the feminist movement, the students' demonstrations for free speech and against the war in Vietnam – were all grassroots movements which enabled people to realize that they could bring about change more effectively than the politicians. Like so many others, Dorothy Rodgers may have been affected.
by the spirit of the period, and may have tried to bring about political changes because she felt that times were right for the general public to be more involved than ever before. Indeed, she was not the only Jewish American woman who tried to bring about political changes.

VI. Historical Context

Assessing Dorothy Rodgers’ correspondences would be more meaningful if she were compared to other Jewish women of her time who also became public figures. In the introduction to their book, *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (2001), Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna state that “[Jewish] women exposed their changing commitments in four different venues: at home, in the synagogue, within the Jewish community, and among Christians in the larger community.” Rodgers fits this model almost perfectly. Although she often wrote that being a wife and a mother was her main purpose in life, later on she became somewhat discontent with being just a complacent homemaker -- hence, the correspondence “hobby”, despite her husband's wishes. This correspondence was not limited to anti-Semitic issues but to a great many other social causes, which fall under Nadell and Sarna’s fourth category: “among Christians in the larger community”. Her activity in the Jewish community consisted of her involvement with the Jewish Museum and other ventures. Rodgers’ lack of involvement in the synagogue (Nadell and Sarna’s third category) could be explained by her marriage to an atheist, and the fact that their relationship was characterized by her wish to be a supporting wife. Still, she found other ways to express her Judaism, which fit well with Nadell and Sarna's claim that

> [W]omen expressed their Judaism by working within the Jewish community, particularly in charitable and educational endeavors. For many, indeed, communal service – social, philanthropic, and educational work – came to define their Judaism.  

As a philanthropist Rodgers was extensively involved with Jewish cultural organizations. It seems that this work provided her with a sense of belonging to Judaism, denied to her through her inability to observe Jewish laws and attend regular service in the synagogue. Rodgers found her own ways of expressing her religious identity, some of which may have been quite uncommon, if not unique (the correspondence against anti-Semitism). However, she was not unique as a Jewish female activist. Quite a few of her Jewish female contemporaries were socially active and effected changes in American Jewish society.

Nadell and Sarna mention three twentieth-century women who excelled in their roles as rabbis’ wives, but in addition found an outlet for their innovative ideas: Esther Jungreis, a charismatic Orthodox preacher; Blu Greenberg, an Orthodox feminist, and Justine Wise Polier, a lawyer and family court judge, who always fought for social justice for the poor, minorities and children. Women, according to Nadell and Sarna, played a vital part in the history of American Judaism.

Among the Jewish female activists in the twentieth century were several leaders of the feminist movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, such as Betty Friedan, who inspired the second wave of feminism. In addition to the regular feminist causes, Jewish women became advocates of equality for women in Jewish law, synagogues and communal institutions. They raised these issues in two successful conferences in *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Spring 2009 Volume 6 Number 1* 

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1973 and 1974 and demanded that the conservative movement allow them to be part of a minyan (quorum of ten men required for prayer) and be ordained as rabbis. Two prominent participants of the conferences were Blu Greenberg, an Orthodox feminist active in bridging the gap between Orthodox Judaism and feminism, and Bella Abzug, a congresswoman and feminist leader, whose rebellious nature was revealed at the age of thirteen, when she insisted on saying Kaddish (the prayer for the dead traditionally recited by men) for her father, as he had no male descendant.

Judith Plaskow was another prominent feminist who wrote that "Jewish feminists could not turn their back on their Jewish past". This statement carries the same sentiment that is expressed by Rodgers in The Star Ledger. It may indicate that Rodgers and Plaskow shared the same views about their religion – pride in their heritage without the need to be Orthodox. In her book, Standing Again at Sinai, Plaskow called for the reconstruction of Jewish history to include the history of women, thereby altering Jewish memory.

Plaskow spoke in conferences, along with Annette Daum, coordinator of the Reform movement's department of interreligious affairs. Both had to cope with expressions of anti-Semitism by the larger feminist movement.

Thus it seems that in addition to the problem of sexual inequality confronting all American feminists, Jewish feminists had to be concerned with the inequality inherent in the Jewish tradition, both within and outside the synagogue, and with the problem of anti-Semitism in the American feminist movement.

It is worth noting that there were many more Jewish political female activists when Dorothy Rodgers was conducting her correspondence: Faith Holsaret, Vivian Leburg Rothstein, Gertrude "Trudy" Weissman Orris, Dottie Miller Zellner, Barbara Jacobs Haber and Carol Ruth Silver. These Jewish women left college and a comfortable home in the North at a young age (some were eighteen at the time), as well as the prospect of higher education and a secure future, and went South (especially in the summer of 1960) to demonstrate for civil rights. They wanted to fight racial injustice and were prepared to risk their lives for democratic ideals.

Another type of twentieth-century Jewish female activists were the union activists –active in labor unions, striving to improve women's work conditions and pay. Alice Kessler-Harris describes the contribution of three such women: Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn and Rose Pesotta. The three activists sacrificed personal security, education and happiness for their ideals. Rose Schneiderman, a labor organizer, socialist and suffragette, was also involved in labor issues and employed by the government to advance labor causes.

Perhaps the most prominent Jewish American political activist who was a contemporary of Dorothy Rodgers was Bella Abzug, a leader of the women's movement. Abzug was active in many areas including supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, opposing the Vietnam War and President Nixon after the Watergate scandal, taking on civil rights cases in the South as a lawyer, and representing Manhattan and New York State in the House of Representatives. It is feasible to assume that being a public figure, a contemporary of Rodgers and based in New York, she was a role model for Rodgers in her political activities. Some of Rodgers' letters dealt with similar issues that Abzug raised. It is quite likely that Abzug's many pursuits encouraged Rodgers to fight for the same causes in a way that suited her.

The list of politically or socially active Jewish women in the middle of the twentieth century is long, and only a few have been mentioned here to illustrate the
historiographic context of Dorothy Rodgers' political and social involvement. Rodgers was not unique in her crusade to improve life in America. Still, there are considerable differences between her and the other female Jewish activists. Whereas most of the women mentioned above risked their lives, gave up personal comfort, education, security and even marriage to fight for their ideology, Rodgers was involved in different areas and certainly did not risk her life or security. She did not join the picket lines and did not demonstrate in the South. In short, by sitting in the comfort of her luxury apartment and writing letters, Rodgers sacrificed little or no physical comfort compared to her contemporaries. But among her own social milieu she was relatively unique. Perhaps the greatest distinction between her and other social activists was her age: Rodgers started her correspondence when she was fifty-six while other social activists started their career at a much younger age, usually during their college years. Other women’s social pursuits spanned throughout their lifetimes, whereas Rodgers' "career" spanned about twenty years. Due to her comfortable financial situation, her struggle for change was not as difficult as that of her contemporaries, yet she too deserves credit for her efforts and achievements. Above all, it seems that Rodgers was politically active because she cared, as demonstrated in her letters and autobiography.

VII. Concerns for Individuals and Understanding of Ordinary People

Even though Rodgers was described by her critics as a cold mother and a self-centered woman, the evidence of her activist correspondence suggests she cared for people she did not know. At her core, Dorothy Rodgers was a sensitive woman who cared about her world and the individuals who populated it. Perhaps her treatment of Zoe is the best evidence of these traits. Zoe, the daughter of an English friend of Rodgers’, was sent to her with her nanny during World War II; both were welcomed by Dorothy and Richard although they had never met the girl before. Dorothy Rodgers treated the girl kindly as if she were her own daughter. She sent her to the same school as her own daughters, bought her whatever she needed and did her best to console her when terrible news arrived of the mother’s death in London, in one of the German bombings. Another example of her kindness to a stranger involved a teenage girl from Ireland (the niece of a woman who worked for Rodgers), who arrived in New York to visit her sister but was denied entry into the USA because she had only $50 instead of the compulsory $250. The girl’s explanation that she was going to stay with her own sister did not help her with the officials, who wanted to send her back. The problem was solved only after the American sister arrived and gave her Irish sister $200. The emotional torment that the girl suffered touched Rodgers' heart. On January 12, 1972 she wrote a letter to Congressman Koch, in which she described this story. She finished her letter by asking what would have happened if the sister had not arrived or if the girl had had to take a connecting flight to another city. Rodgers undertook to write a letter and make an issue of the case so that immigration procedures would be changed.63

Rodgers’ sensitivity is strongly manifested in McCall's monthly column "Of Two Minds" that she wrote for nine years with her daughter Mary Rodgers Guettel. This advice column answered women’s questions from two points of view – mother’s and daughter’s. One article from March 1976 involved a married woman who asked whether there was anything wrong with flirting.64 Mary answered by criticizing the woman as being hypocritical and silly. Contrary to this blunt and offensive answer,
Dorothy explained that if the woman would have contemplated about it she would find herself "less than happy with your behavior and that does make it wrong – for you." She suggested that the woman should think about her flirting, making her understand the consequences of such behavior and reach the conclusion that it was morally wrong. Dorothy’s gentle and sensible answer might have helped the woman more than any reproof or disapproval.

Rodgers’ understanding of other people is evident in the book she wrote with the same daughter, *A Word to the Wives*, a practical handbook with many housekeeping tips. The target readers were middle-class women that did not have maids or ample time on their hands. For example, she advised the readers not to polish brass and silver too often, or alternatively, buy stainless steel; similarly, she recommended readers to buy no-iron sheets to save time. Other tips for the good homemaker included having a stock of necessities at home, putting everything in its place, shopping early in the morning and planning meals for the whole week in advance. These types of tips are not what anyone would expect to be given by a very rich woman who relied on an army of servants. The fact that Rodgers was able to write such a book shows that she was not detached from the needs of ordinary women.

**VIII. Dorothy Rodgers' Attitude to her Husband and Children**

Dorothy Rodgers cared not only about other people and civic issues; her primary role was as wife and mother, and she expressed her concern for her family as her major vocation in many interviews. Meryle Secrest presents a different view. She describes a tense, tumultuous relationship between Richard and Dorothy Rodgers: "Their second daughter, Linda, said of her parents, ‘I think it was a very strange relationship. They needed and supported each other and were the worst people in the world for each other.’"

For all the tension that may have existed in their relationship, Dorothy’s love for Richard seems unquestionable as shown in her correspondence. Below are excerpts from some of her love letters to Richard.

In an undated letter from London she writes, "...The one thing that is very steady, though, is my love for you. I adore you and thank you for everything. All my love, Dorothy"

In another letter from February 13, 1950, after twenty years of marriage, she writes, "Thank you, darling, for being just about the nicest guy in the whole world! And I love you very much. All my love, Dorothy"

In a letter dated June 27, 1952, after twenty-two years of marriage, she says, "You've given great happiness to Williams, but especially to me and I'm proud to be your girl."

An undated letter from Moscow: "I miss you, darling, and I love you very much. Much, much love – Mrs. R."

Another undated short letter: "Darling, I love you, I love you, I love you. Do I make myself clear? Love, Mrs. R."

A letter she wrote him on their 25th wedding anniversary, March 5, 1955, also contains many expressions of love.

There are additional letters of this type, all expressing her love to her husband, and all showing genuine feelings.

Another expression of devotion can be found in the dedication in her first book, *My Favorite Things: A Personal Guide to Decorating and Entertaining*: "For Dick, with..."
love for living this book, and with me." In the introduction she wrote "...my husband and my family are the center of my life." She was fifty-five years old, married for thirty-four years at the time. Her correspondence began a year later.

This devotion can also be seen in her answers to a questionnaire sent to her by *Harper's Bazaar* magazine in 1970 (she had been married for 40 years). One question asked respondents to name "The single person who has most influenced your accomplishments". Rodgers' answer was: "My husband." "What was the most significant choice you ever made?" Her answer was "To marry my husband. It was most fortuitous and I have certainly never regretted it." Another question was "Which of your accomplishments do you consider to be the most worthwhile?" To this Rodgers replied: "Having helped to create an environment in which my husband could work happily."

In the foreword to her autobiography, *A Personal Book*, after forty-seven years of marriage, Rodgers writes:

...home, for me, is wherever Dick is...It is Dick I think of first – and I always have. As children, Mary and Linda understood that their father was always first with me, and at times they must have felt shut out, but I think they knew, too, that they were a close second.

These documents reveal that Dorothy’s love for Richard remained strong throughout their entire married life, from the age of seventeen when she fell in love with him, at least till the age of sixty-eight when she published her autobiography.

If we compare letters she wrote to him to those he wrote to her, we see a very different style. The bulk of Richard Rodgers' letters concern work, meetings and social activities. Only in closing does he express feelings of affection: "I love you," and "I love you terribly". "I'm nuts about you anyway and I'll never stop loving you," "I can't wait to see you. I dreamed of you again last night. What's this? I knew I was crazy about you, but I didn't realize it was an obsession," and "I am crazy about you."

Secrest claims that Richard betrayed Dorothy many times. She knew it and suffered from it, but was a loyal wife. While this may be an accurate account, it is too limited. With the fuller account of their lives afforded by the documents in the Schlesinger library collection, it is apparent that the two supported each other in hard times of life, whether professionally (failure of a musical that he wrote or difficulty in finding a producer) or medically (both underwent major surgeries and suffered from various chronic illnesses). Dorothy's love for her husband, as reflected in her letters to him, puts their relationship in a more complex light than the way their daughter Linda perceived it.

"I love being married," Rodgers said to Eugenia Sheppard in an interview in *The New York Post*. Married for forty years at the time of the interview, she was being interviewed about her book, *A Word to the Wives*, written with her daughter Mary. She claimed that the book was about "the joys of marriage". In that interview Rodgers and her daughter express the opinion that a woman should defer and acquiesce ninety-nine percent of the time (my emphasis). This is a very different view from that of a 'liberated' woman of the era.

Rodgers probably never realized that her own children would target her as the object of the same type of complaint used by children of working mothers. She stated

many times that she was not career-oriented and that her home, husband and children were her first priority. Having read most of her books, letters and documents, it seems that her statements were genuine, and that she was indeed a wife and mother first. Though she never developed a real career, she used her talents and connections for the welfare of society.

Rodgers was aware of the price that children of working mothers pay. In her autobiographical book, *A Personal Book*, she wrote:

I know many working mothers with college-age children – intelligent, loving, warm and caring parents – who would be shocked to learn that their children feel they have been deprived of mothering and think the whole family has been short-changed.

One would expect Rodgers’ children to acknowledge their mother's love and care. However, in the above-mentioned interview for *The New York Post* (1970), Mary Rodgers Guettel, the eldest daughter, disclosed: "We didn't get along...I didn't like her. I thought she was super-perfect." In Secrest's book, Mary describes her mother as a cold and stern woman who complained that her daughters did not love her. Linda, the youngest daughter, also never felt loved by her mother. Yet the very fact that Mary collaborated with her mother in authoring a book and in writing a column ("Of Two Minds") for a women's magazine for nine years seems to contradict Mary's account. This kind of intensive collaboration for such a long time would not have been possible if the relationship was problematic. Perhaps, Mary managed to overcome difficult memories she had from her childhood and come to terms with her mother, as often happens between parents and grown children.

Rodgers' feelings for her family are also mirrored in her attitude to the feminist movement. In the aforementioned *Harper's Bazaar* questionnaire, her reply to the question: "If women had more political power, would things be different today?" was: "I think there would be fewer wars, less pollution, better education and finer health resources." In her personal correspondence these issues come up; she did indeed write about these issues (she wanted to stop the war in Vietnam and Cambodia). But she was not a self-proclaimed feminist, though she supported the feminist cause. When asked: "Do you feel a sense of shame or pride when you hear about militant demonstrations by women's Lib? Why?" she answered "Neither. I recognize an aggressive non-violent approach as being necessary to bring about change (Rodgers’ emphasis). To the next question "Do you feel that a woman must sacrifice femininity in order to be professionally successful?" she replied "No". And to the following question: "Should men and women share the burden of housework and child raising?" she declared "It should be shared" (yet she never asked her husband to share the burden with her).

In an interview with Martin Bookspan of the NBC radio network concerning her autobiography she states:

Although I know the Women's Liberation Movement wouldn't praise me for this, Dick always came first, and then the children. And whatever I have done has been done in the time left to me.

In this interview she agrees with the feminist movement about one thing: the choice women should have – the choice to marry, to have children, and "to do it the way I did it or put the career first."

We have seen that Rodgers’ love for her husband lasted for many years, that she was devoted to him and to her children and saw this as her first priority. During that time she was aware of the growing influence of the feminist movement and women's growing ambitions – and success – in terms of career. Still, her priorities stayed constant. The written correspondence (letters and interviews) presents a more loving attitude to her family than recounted by her daughters. It may illustrate the complexity of her nature and perhaps also the presence of good intentions, which somehow went awry.

IX. The Independent Thinker Started from a Submissive Wife

The previous section presents Rodgers in a different light from that presented by her own daughters in Secrest’s book. These conflicting reports may follow a trend in which anecdotes in Secrest’s book are described differently in Rodgers’ autobiography. One account explains Rodgers’ former submissive nature, much different from what she developed later in life. This event caused a rift between Dorothy and Richard Rodgers during the first year of their marriage. At the time they were living in London in the same house with Richard’s partner Larry Hart:

So when Larry Hart arrived one evening in the company of Jed Harris, then the most successful producer and director in the United States, Rodgers was ready to keep him there all night if necessary… So when Dorothy, pleading a headache, went to bed, Dick was probably delighted to have her leave so that the three of them could get down to business. There must have been several rounds of drinks. The hours slipped away, chattering, talking about ideas, swapping jokes, and roaring with laughter… Finally, it was four in the morning. Rodgers heard an upstairs bedroom door slam and guessed at once what had happened. He raced upstairs. Dorothy said, "I'm terribly sorry, darling, and I know I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't get to sleep, and I was just getting so frustrated." Rodgers said, "They're just about to leave. I'll be right up."

She remembered: "Well, he came up in a few minutes. He got undressed, folded everything very neatly, and sat down on a chair to take off his shoes." All this was done in complete silence. It transpired that Harris had agreed to produce a show with them, but now that she had interrupted this fruitful conversation, of course, he would not do so. (Harris did not.) That was awful enough, but her husband's icy disapproval was the final blow. She cried herself to sleep.

It is hard to believe that Harris decided not to produce a show with Rodgers and Hart because Dorothy interrupted them just when they were about to leave. The same account sounds totally different in Dorothy's book:

But by the time the guests had left, I had a splitting headache from the day's tensions and I was feeling nauseated from a combination of fatigue, pregnancy and general stress. I couldn't wait to get to bed and put an end to this altogether miserable day. Just as I was starting up the stairs, I heard the front door open and in walked Larry with...
Jed Harris. Jed was the most brilliant and exciting director-producer in the New York theatre, and, obviously, an important figure… After few minutes of playing the gracious hostess, I gave up and asked Dick in a whisper if it would be all right with him if I went to bed. He agreed; I gave my apologies and disappeared to the floor above. Once in bed, I tried to go to sleep; trying to go to sleep became an obsession with me for the next four hours. The voices of the three men merged into a low rumble, punctuated every few minutes by loud guffaws. I was frantic. Finally, at about four a.m., I got up, opened the door to the bedroom, slammed it shut and jumped back into bed. I knew instantly that I shouldn't have done it. In a few seconds, Dick bounded up the stairs and into the room.85

In the description that follows, Richard says to Dorothy: "Jed was going to do a show with Larry and me, but of course he probably won't do it now."86 But Dorothy doubts it:

Next morning I had to find out if Jed was really mad at me. Terrified, I phoned to invite him to lunch. He was warm in his greeting, solicitous of my health and accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. (Jed never did do a show with Rodgers and Hart, but that was because they never found an idea they all liked. And Dick did forgive me – long before I forgave myself. 87

A comparison of these two sources indicates that Dorothy's behavior had nothing to do with the business relations that Richard craved from his guest. Dorothy is presented negatively by Secrest when her behavior is understandable in view of her condition (splitting headache, fatigue, pregnancy, nausea, stress, late hour).

It is interesting to note, though, that at the time Dorothy, then twenty-one years old, apologizes to her husband about her protest and feels awful because of his disapproval. This behavior seems in line with what she said in the interview with her daughter Mary that “a woman should confer and acquiesce ninety-nine percent of the time (with her husband).” Much later in life she conducted a vast correspondence in spite of her husband’s disapproval and was not bothered by it. Yet in the interview described above she expressed the belief that a woman should agree with and obey her husband. How can this contradiction be explained? Rodgers’ correspondence demonstrates her development from a dependent, inexperienced, submissive young wife into an independent woman who had her own opinion about everything and everyone and was not afraid to express it and press for its acceptance in the highest echelons. This personal development may have been due to her achievements in various fields, her need to make decisions during her husband’s long absences and the general influence of the women’s liberation movement. At the same time, because of the love she felt for her husband, she may have still felt that in most instances a woman had to respect and agree with her husband. Thus it seems that her love and her correspondence are two distinct forces in her life, one pushing towards submissiveness while the other towards independence, just as other aspects of her complex personality are described differently by different people, some treating her as a monster (Stephen Sondheim in Secret’s book)88 while others (such as charity organization chairpersons) as a kind and generous woman.
In sum, Dorothy Rodgers was an unusual woman who deserves to be remembered not because she was a rich socialite, married to a famous and beloved composer, or because she was active in volunteer organizations like many other women in her social milieu, but rather because she was a citizen who cared about everything and tried to improve the environment in many respects through correspondence, not sparing any effort to do what she believed in.

Her memory should be highlighted by the many positive aspects in her personality and numerous activities she undertook, most of which have not been published as yet. It is fair to assume that she wanted the public to know about her contributions to the American society; therefore she left her correspondence to the Schlesinger library instead of destroying it or leaving it to her family.

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Kessler-Harris, Alice. "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and their Union." In *American Jewish Women's History*, 100-115.


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The “One-Woman Lobby on Anything and Everything: “Discovering the Other Side of Dorothy Rodgers


Notes

1 The quoted part of the title is taken from Dorothy Rodgers, A Personal Book (New York: Harpers & Row, 1977), 171.

2 This article was written during the author’s sabbatical at Harvard University in the fall semester, 2005. Her affiliation was with the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program.

3 I want to thank Dr. Sally Schwager from the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, for her considerable inspiration and help in finding the subject of this article. I also want to thank the staff in the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Yard, Harvard University, for their help in finding the material for this article.

4 Tobin Belzer, “A Jewish Identity at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class: Dorothy Feiner Rodgers,” Race, Gender & Class 6, 4 (1999), 152-173.


6 Dorothy Rodgers, Dorothy Feiner Rodgers Papers (Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, 1922-1987). Cartons 1-3.

7 All the correspondence in this section, as well as in sections II, III, IV and VII, unless otherwise indicated, is from Carton 3.

8 File 114.

9 Ibid.

10 File 116.

11 Ibid.

12 File 114.

13 File 115.

14 Carton 1, file 27.

15 Carton 1, file 28.

16 File 120.

17 File 133.
The “One-Woman Lobby on Anything and Everything: “Discovering the Other Side of Dorothy Rodgers

With Gordon Davis, commissioner (file 130).

File 140.

Ibid.

File 138.

File 118.

File 136.

File 120.

File 135.

File 128.

File 141.

File 140.

File 141.


File 137.

File 140.

File 125.

File 122.

File 124.

Ibid.

File 122.

Ibid.

File 143. Currently hospitals work on this basis.

File 127.

Ibid.

File 139.
In almost every interview with her, and in most of her books, she speaks about her ultimate commitment to her husband and children as her first priority in her life.


daughter of Stephen S. Wise, the leading Reform Rabbi of his day


Debra L. Schultz, "Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement." In *American Jewish Women's History*, 281-296.

Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and their Union." In *American Jewish Women's History*, 100-115.

Carton 3, file 140.
The “One-Woman Lobby on Anything and Everything: “Discovering the Other Side of Dorothy Rodgers

64 Carton 2, file 102.


66 Ibid, 272.

67 Ibid, 296.

68 Secrest, 178.

69 Carton 1, file 9.


71 Ibid, xiii.

72 Preparation for a series of articles about 100 women "in touch with our time" which never took place (Carton 1, file 40).


75 In 1930, before their wedding.

76 November 6, 1932.

77 August 16, 1934.

78 April 3, 1945.

79 October 29, 1970; Carton 1, file 54.


81 Carton 1, file 40.


83 Carton 1, file 62.

84 Secrest, 13-14.


86 Ibid, 77.
The “One-Woman Lobby on Anything and Everything: “Discovering the Other Side of Dorothy Rodgers

87 Ibid, 77-78.

88 Secrest, 177.