

## Mother

— Embracing me, Esther greeted me as her “young comrade.” The eighty-three-year - old white-haired anarchist was wearing a brightly colored housedress and the black and red badge of the CNT (Confederatio’n National de Trabajo), the Spanish anarchist union on her collar. Her spontaneous friendliness, unconventional appearance, and profound humanity made all the elegant old ladies of the Upper East Side, whose appearance had fascinated me, pale in comparison. —

We have the German journalist Ulrike Heider to thank for that accurate, loving description of my mother, Esther Judith Miller Dolgoff, in her old age. “Profound humanity” is the key quality. It extended beyond humanity to all living things, plant and animal, down to the tiny mouse that flit across the kitchen linoleum to the trash can. “Poor thing,” she would say, “all it is trying to do is survive in this world.”

The roots of Mother’s compassion were sunk in the rich cultural soil of the Pale of Settlement: today’s eastern Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. It was the region within which the Jews of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were confined. Religious orthodoxy, revolutionary socialism, anarchism, entrepreneurial capitalism, art, literature — these strains mixed within that confined space, commonly within the same large family, often within the same individual!

Mother traced her radical family history back to that region and to her much older cousin whom she never met. An interview conducted by Doug Richardson in the 1970’s is most revealing.

**Esther:** .... my father’s nephew was an anarchist and he was in that movement where the students went to the people to teach them how to read.

**Doug:** The Narodniki?

**Sam:** No, the Narodnaya Volya (Will of the People), a later group.

**Esther:** And even before he came to America, my mother would tell me how he didn't care about himself, how she would get a hold of him and make him mend his clothes, and feed him up because he looked like he forgot to eat. And he and his wife staged a strike, and his wife became very ill, she caught the flu, and he was arrested and was going to be sent to Siberia. And during all this trouble his wife died of the flu, and according to Jewish law they have to bury the body before sundown, but his mother-in-law at a time like that was arranging to get him out to London through the sort of underground railroad

that they had then. The people threw stones into the house she hadn't buried the body of her daughter.

**Doug: So you had sort of a radical family history...**

**Esther:** Yes, these were some of the sources.

Her father, Abraham Miller, my grandfather, was another source. He was a veteran of the Tsars army, and a socialist with strong anarchistic leanings, who was influenced by the writings of the anarchist-pacifist Gustav Landauer: this twenty years prior to his martyrdom. Abraham, wife Ida, and six-month-old Esther settled in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1906. There Abraham and Ida raised six children, of whom Esther was the oldest. He was a well-paid bricklayer, a builder of restaurant ovens and exhaust chimneys, and a staunch union man.

It is fair to describe the Millers as a typical, striving immigrant family. All six children attended college, not a small achievement even today for a working-class family, and more than that in the 1920's. Esther graduated Western Reserve University with a degree in English literature; her diploma, which I cherish, written on genuine sheepskin. She was also admitted to medical school – a very difficult thing for a woman, but was forced not to attend for financial reasons as the Depression closed in. Conventional stuff you might say, but Mother remained unconventional, and became an active member of the Anarchist Forum, and similar organizations in the Cleveland area.

My father, who preferred to be called by his first name Sam, often joked to Mother's mock chagrin that "this proper young lady chased me up and down Cleveland in a taxi!" That she fell in love with him, this itinerant Wobbly hobo, after he had hopped an all-night freight from Detroit to speak at the Forum. Jokes aside, he was well aware that meeting Mother was the best thing that ever happened to him. It is an understatement that Mother's family was not uniformly delighted by her choice." He'll give you syphilis", sister Sarah hissed upon first sight of my roughly dressed, roughly mannered, bluntly spoken, future father.

Certainly, Mother could have sought a more "suitable" mate; an attractive, educated young woman, she had many such opportunities. But she would have none of it and chose to live a principled life in partnership with my housepainter father instead. They remained together for nearly sixty years: until Mother's death in 1989 and Father's in 1990. Their lives were inseparable.

Mother stayed home with brother Abraham and me rather than pursuing a career of her own. Not because she felt compelled to do so by the customs of the day; rather she felt the care and nurturing of her children was more important than any job that paid her.

Abraham and I frequently reminisced after our parents were gone that Mother's devotion to her family and to anarchism came at a cost: the suppression of her ego and at the expense of her creativity. She wrote promising short stories as a young woman, and a play that impressed a literary comrade (I am not sure, but I believe Paul Goodman) to the extent that he tried to help her reach theatrical producers. And she had an off-beat way of cutting to the bone on cultural matters. I remember her caustic comment regarding Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, which, to be fair, conflates the author with the central character of the novel.

"Let's see if I got this right. He's a grown man and can't get an erection. That he blames on his mother. But he did grow up to become a world-famous writer, didn't he? That's a bit of credit he saves for himself!"

Mother was a charter member of the "Mother's Union."

Unfortunately, Mother's personal creative efforts were sporadic and she did not find the time to follow up on leads. Instead, her sentences are woven into my father's articles and books, into unsigned pieces in various publications, in notices and speeches, etc. But there was one aspect of her creativity that never varied. Her love of Yiddish, the rich day to day language of the European Jews before Hebrew became the language of the emergent Israel. She loved the stories of Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Ash, Isaac Singer, and so many others.

Her Yiddish was impeccable and I get this from the best source: her devoutly religious European neighbors of the co-op my parents lived in. They'd stop me in the hall and make a kissing gesture with the fingertips from their lips. "Your mother speaks a beautiful Yiddish, " they'd exclaim.

She made several attempts to put her love of Yiddish to use. In the late 1940's or early 1950's she was so impressed with the Yiddish version of the *Autobiography of Louise Michel* that she translated it into English, but the project fell through. The same fate awaited her translation of the present Joseph Cohen work -- the work of a man she deeply admired-- until Kenyan Zimmer took on the herculean task of preparing it for publication. As a

comrade from Philadelphia familiar with Mother's project explained to me some years ago, the problem was not Mother's translation but flaws in the original Cohen manuscript that made for difficulties in organization and structure.

I know this: It is too bad Mother did not live to see her work, with her name on it, in print! To hold it in her hands! The satisfaction, the *noches* it would have brought her. Thank you, Kenyan for this tribute to her memory.