



**GROUND
BREAKING
JEWISH
FEMINISTS**

PURSUING SOCIAL JUSTICE

SHARON LEDER

Published by
Hybrid Global Publishing
301 E 57th Street
4th Floor
New York, NY 10022

Copyright © 2021 by Sharon Leder

All quotations from the Hebrew Bible from *Tanakh: A New Translation of The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by in any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law.

Manufactured in the United States of America, or in the United Kingdom when distributed elsewhere.

Leder, Sharon
Three Groundbreaking Jewish Feminists: Pursuing Social Justice
LCCN: 2020924538

ISBN: 978-1-951943-42-4
eBook: 978-1-951943-43-1

Cover design by: Jonathan Pleska
Copyediting by: Claudia Volkman
Interior design by: Suba Murugan
Author photo by: Michael Krassner
Cover: Detail from *Maremoto* (Tsunami) and interior illustrations by Susana Wald
Index by: Larry Baker

CONTENTS

Foreword by Debra Renee Kaufman

Preface

Introduction

Chapter 1 Gerda Lerner

Personal Association

Resisting Jewish Victimization: Becoming Political, Not Religious

Refugee, Not Immigrant

American Radical and Communist

Historian of Women

Chapter 2 Susana Wald

Personal Association

Professional Accomplishments

A Threatened Jewish Core, A Miraculous Rescue

The Cover of Catholicism: Creating a Double Identity

Reconnecting with a Jewish Past

Another New and Dangerous Sanctuary in Surrealism

A Surrealist in Spite of Surrealism: Transcendence and Gender

Feminist Transformative Art

Declaring Jewish Identity in Mexico

Chapter 3 Ruth W. Messinger and Social Justice Judaism

Personal Association

Critical Influences

Early Activism: 1950s–1960s

Non-Racist Education and Social Justice Judaism

The Concept of the Chosen People

Expanding the Jewish Universe of Obligation on the Macro Level

AJWS' Work Internationally on the Macro Level: The Case of Sex Workers in Thailand

AJWS' Work Internationally on the Micro Level: The Volunteer Corps

American Jewish World Service and Israel

Epilogue: The Need for Universalism

Acknowledgments

Bibliography

Index

GERDA LERNER (APRIL 30, 1920 —JANUARY 2, 2013)

Personal Association

I became aware of Gerda Lerner's scholarship in 1977–78, when for the second time I taught mainly Black, Latino, and Latina students. I used Lerner's groundbreaking documentary anthology *Black Women in White America* (1972)¹ as the dominant text in my writing classes in the Franconia External Degree Program (FRED). Lerner's collection was one of the first books to detail the contributions of Black women to American history. It paved the way for the development of the field of Black Women's History.

My students were paraprofessionals in human service fields who needed to obtain bachelor's degrees in order to keep their jobs. I taught them thesis writing and institutional analysis by traveling across New England to their workplaces—schools, hospitals, and social service agencies—to supervise their research. Most of my students were women—teachers' aids, nurses' assistants, and lab workers. They appreciated the materials Lerner had gathered, many previously unpublished, documenting Black women's heroic efforts to organize self-help networks and to sustain their human dignity.

It was only later, when I became a teacher of Women's Studies (1978–86) at the University of Buffalo, that I learned more of Lerner's refugee past: her being deported from Nazi-occupied Austria in 1939 and becoming, in the United States in the late 1960s, one of the pioneering founders of Women's History across lines of class, ethnicity, race, and culture.

Lerner is most well-known for focusing on the important ways women throughout history continually resisted victimization under race- and class-biased, male-dominated systems. During the 1970s, many radical feminists were stressing the oppression and subjugation of women by patriarchy.²

Instead, Lerner's scholarship emphasizes women's agency, their coming to feminist consciousness, and the ways women of different cultures, ethnicities, races, and classes empowered themselves through organizing for women's rights and racial and economic equality, especially in the United States.³

As one of the founders of the field of Women's History, Lerner ensured its continuity through promoting the establishment of Women's History Month in the United States. She launched the first master's and doctoral programs in the field of Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, respectively.⁴

In Women's Studies at the University of Buffalo, as in the FRED program, I worked with colleagues who, like Gerda Lerner, were secular Jews with universalist perspectives. They saw the fight against anti-Black racism as linked with the fight against anti-Semitism. Prior to that, though, I worked with more mainstream, traditional Jewish colleagues who tended to focus exclusively on combating anti-Semitism to the exclusion of other causes. They often experienced me as splitting the ranks because of my commitment as a Jew to ending anti-Black racism. As I was writing this book, I learned that Lerner had also been vulnerable to similar criticisms.⁵

My being accused of splitting the Jewish ranks as a teacher occurred the first time I taught English to mainly Black, Latino, and Latina students in 1967–69 at Lefferts Junior High School in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. This was the same time the New York City's United Federation of Teachers (UFT) went on strike over community control of schools. The Community School Board in the mainly Black neighborhood next to mine in Brooklyn, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, preemptorily fired teachers the board did not think were equipped to teach their youngsters.⁶ The dismissed teachers were almost all Jewish, as were most of the teachers in my school who joined the strike. Many African-Americans accused the UFT of being "Jewish-dominated,"⁷ UFT President Albert Shanker being Jewish and the UFT chapter chairman in Ocean Hill-Brownsville being Jewish as well.⁸

I was expected to join the strike because I was new to my school and a recent college graduate who had never taught before. And I was Jewish. However, in the few months before the strike, I came to separate myself from the school's majority of Jewish teachers because they seemed to be more concerned with issues of discipline than with empowering students to

learn. They were not inclined, as I was, to encourage the students to develop within themselves the Black pride that the Black faculty in the school were encouraging.

My strike breaking caused me to lose my job about a year later, though teaching small classes during the strike was the most meaningful time I ever spent with my students. Their parents encouraged them to attend the classes being taught by fewer than ten teachers—all the Black faculty and two other Jewish teachers besides myself. All of us engaged the students in reading contemporary Black authors and discussed current events with them. Had Lerner's *Black Women in America* been available then, I probably would have used it with my seventh through ninth graders.

Like mine, Lerner's identification with marginalized "others" different from herself was an extension and affirmation of her Jewishness. She had learned to connect her own vulnerability as a Jew under fascism and Nazi anti-Semitism to others who were also targets of discrimination. In the United States, that meant workers, women, and Blacks.

Lerner's positive identification with American Blacks began her first year in Manhattan when she walked across town to Sydenham Hospital in Harlem where she worked and trained to be an X-ray technician. Sydenham was a Black hospital where, Lerner explains in her political autobiography *Fireweed*, she "dealt with the injured, the sick, the disturbed." She took her lunches in the parks "with black mothers and their children or with homeless idlers on park benches," and she "never felt alienation or hostility or danger." As a new refugee in New York, she perceived Blacks as much more outgoing and friendly than other people.⁹ She appreciated their "liveliness," much as she had appreciated the boisterous sounds of working-class people in the Karl Marx Hof houses she had passed on her walks to school as a youngster in Vienna.¹⁰

Lerner became critical of assimilated Jews in the United States, whose blending in to dominant, white Protestant society included their gaining privileges from institutionalized racial segregation that discriminated against American Blacks in the workforce and the housing market.¹¹ Like I did, she probably asked herself the question, "Why aren't more Jews in the United States connecting the racism against Blacks with the ways Jews throughout history have been scapegoated?" For me, racial segregation had created a systemic problem in education—segregated schools without sufficient numbers of faculty of color for students to look up to as role

models and curricula that did not sufficiently encourage Black self-empowerment.

In studying more of Lerner's life, I wished to understand how she navigated being able to use her privilege as an academic professional not only to do what was good for the Jews, but also to encourage the success of others, such as Blacks and working-class women, without abandoning her Jewish identity.

In her essay "A Weave of Connections," published in 1997, Lerner wrote, "I am a historian because of my Jewish experience."¹² It was the verbatim response she had given in the early 1990s to Joyce Antler, a social and cultural historian, when Antler invited her to speak at a conference on the subject of U.S. Jewish women's history at Brandeis. However, this considered response by Lerner only followed upon her initial retort, "I never thought about it." Indeed, as a pioneering historian of women for a quarter century, Lerner had not written directly of Jewish women's experience. Antler's challenge prompted Lerner to self-examine and set in motion not only the talk that Lerner presented at the conference, but also her book *Why History Matters*, which includes "A Weave of Connections" and several other essays which examine the influence of Jewishness on her work as a historian.

The essays explain that Lerner's simultaneous outsider status under Nazi fascism as a Jew, a woman, and an exile inclined her attention toward other outsiders in the United States whose experiences had not yet been written into history. Lerner considered American Blacks to be America's most targeted outsiders, not Jews.

Nevertheless, the question remained: How could Lerner be a historian because of her Jewish experience but not write about Jewish women's history? In "A Weave of Connections," Lerner implied that for her to have written about Jewish women would have been too particularist, marking her as concerned only with her own religious and ethnic identity and with Israeli nationalism. It made sense for her, she argued, to transcend identity politics and write about other marginalized women.¹³ But, of course, the women she chose to write about need not have been either/or. I believe the emotional reasons behind her avoidance of Jewish women's history were secret even to her at that time, and the organized Jewry practiced in her Vienna childhood did not meet the universal goals and values of the Jewish

tradition which she admired in her pre-adulthood and internalized as ideals for herself.

How then *did* she weave Jewish universalism into the entire body of her life's work as a feminist activist even without writing about Jewish women? How did anti-Semitic conditions sometimes converge in the United States—during the Cold War and the outbreak of the first *intifada* in Israel—to cause Lerner to relive the depth and volatility of anti-Jewish bias that had flared up in Europe? How did rises in anti-Semitism cause her to rethink the effectiveness of universalism as a strategy for creating a world safe for all minorities?

Resisting Jewish Victimization: Becoming Political, Not Religious

Lerner's championing of resistance on the part of women, minorities, and the working classes was rooted in her experience as a Jewish adolescent in 1930s Vienna when fascists and then Nazis came to power and persecuted Jews as inferior outsiders, deviant "others." The fascist attempts to humiliate and victimize Jews forced Lerner "to take a position, to assert or deny" who she was.¹⁴ Lerner's response was to identify with the Viennese Jewish community in the many heroic ways she watched it organize daily to resist while it was under attack:

Ever since that time I have known about the strength of the powerless to check those in power. I have never believed those versions of history and those representations of reality that present the world from the point of view of the powerful. My childhood taught me the wisdom and effectiveness of resistance and the necessity of skepticism toward the values of those who made the rules.¹⁵

Lerner was being trained in an Orthodox synagogue for a *bat mitzvah* in 1934, a year after the right-wing clerical party under Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss took power from the Social Democrats and began cracking down on religious freedom.¹⁶ The Jewish instruction she received from a rabbi in public elementary school under the Social Democrats had ended, and she now sat in classrooms where crucifixes hung. Her congregation responded

by affirming their unity with one another: “We had to stick together because THEY hated us. We had to stick together because we were surrounded by enemies. We had to show that we were proud of our faith. We had to be good to show that Jews could be good.”¹⁷

Lerner later wrote about the deep-seated character of Jewish bonding in times of stress in her sweeping tome *The Creation of Patriarchy*.¹⁸ There she describes how—as early as chapters 15 and 17 of the Book of Genesis—the uniting of the Hebrew tribes under Abram’s leadership would endow them not only with divine blessing, but also with future well-being if they remained loyal to monotheism in the face of the widespread, goddess-centered polytheism surrounding them in the ancient world. The Hebrew God promises Abram and his generations future prosperity, land, and offspring if they continue to worship their one invisible God and to mark their bond through circumcision. God adds to the significance of the ritual by changing Abram’s name to Abraham. “Thus every Jew is born into a historical world,” Lerner wrote in “A Weave of Connections,” referring to God’s promise to Abraham of a better future for his generations. And every Jew is also born with “a consciousness of being linked to other members of the Jewish community.”¹⁹

Ultimately, however, organized Judaism presented a problem for Lerner in its legacy of patriarchy, which is marked by the divine blessing being bestowed only upon males. In “A Weave of Connections,” Lerner pointed out that had she been a boy in Vienna in the 1920s and 30s, she would have been studying Talmud, Mishna, and Midrash: “I would have learned Jewish history in a positive way. I would have learned about the existence of wise rabbis and great leaders,” but “I was a girl,” and this aspect of Jewish learning “was out of my reach.”²⁰

Lerner’s Jewish congregation treated boys and girls differently. Though her parents, Ilona and Robert Kronstein, were both assimilated, mostly nonobservant Jews, the family belonged to an Orthodox congregation due to the influence of Lerner’s paternal grandmother, Grandmama, in whose spacious house Lerner, her parents, and her younger sister lived, in the apartment above Grandmama’s.²¹

The Jewish congregation to which the Kronstein family belonged separated boys and girls during religious services, preventing them from participating equally. Boys and girls were also treated differently when the

ages for their *bar* and *bat mitvahs* were being determined—thirteen for boys, but fourteen for girls.²²

The youngster Gerda Kronstein was sensitive to gender equality because her mother had a great deal of independence in her marriage. Ilona was an unconventional artist/intellectual who kept separate quarters in their apartment for privately entertaining her friends and acquaintances. Ilona had become deeply ambivalent about marriage and motherhood once she and Robert began living in Robert's mother's house, and after giving birth to Gerda, she had a difficult time nursing. Ilona convinced Robert to draw up a legal agreement to define their separate lives.²³

Ilona's need for a private life, and her consequent conflicts with her husband and mother-in-law, strained her relationship with Gerda, who felt deprived of mothering. Gerda's younger sister, Nora, whom Ilona named after Ibsen's proto-feminist heroine in *A Doll's House*, received more pampering than Gerda. In Gerda Lerner's autobiography, she wrote—identifying herself in the third person—that her mother's "unavailability was the predominant theme of those years, and so the child, frequently disappointed and rebuffed, finally transferred allegiance to the governess."²⁴

At age ten, after Ilona fired a nanny to whom Gerda was very attached, probably due to Ilona's feelings of inadequacy as a mother and loss of control, Gerda decided "to depend emotionally on no one," she wrote in her autobiography. "I would try to make it without a father, without a mother. Just on my own."²⁵

Gerda's wished-for closeness to her mother became realized during the political battle for control of Austria in 1933 between the Social Democrats, whom Ilona supported, and Dollfuss' clerical party. At the dinner table, during political conversations about the clerical party's victory, Ilona described the clerical party as "reactionary and secretly anti-Semitic," saying it "did not believe in the rights of working people and tried to foist their religious ideas on everyone."²⁶ By age thirteen, Gerda had personally experienced these religious changes at school.

The dinner discussions resulted in a greater rift between Ilona and Robert. Gerda identified more strongly with her mother's concern for the well-being of the powerless and poor.²⁷ Robert was a successful pharmacist whose leanings were more bourgeois. As an employer, he was irked that

Ilona was defending trade unions and told her “she didn’t know what she was talking about” since “she hadn’t worked a day in her life.”²⁸

One can speculate that even as Gerda yearned for more of her mother’s attention and affection, these conversations highlighted her mother’s limited power as a wife and mother in 1930s Vienna. Not having harmony between her parents, Lerner championed her mother’s side which was more consistent with her own sympathies for the poor and working classes. Thus, Gerda’s attachment to a liberal political agenda reflected in large measure the need she had to be recognized and acknowledged by her unconventional mother, whom she viewed as an intellectual committed to democracy and equality.

“At age fourteen,” Gerda Lerner wrote, “the personal became political for me,” and “in the years between fourteen and seventeen, my relationship with my mother grew in depth and intensity.” Ilona invited her daughter to join the teatime discussions she hosted in her studio among “a circle of young and poor artists and writers” who treated the young Lerner’s contributions to their talk as intelligent: “I . . . learned that I could, if I tried, be considered clever by intellectuals, and so I read avidly, thought deeply and tried to produce cynical bon mots . . . My life-long love of art comes from this adolescent experience, as does my writing.”²⁹

By showing Lerner an alternate model to that of the middle-class housewife and mother, Ilona’s example freed Lerner to pay attention to the political sphere. The proto-fascist Engelbert Dollfuss was rescinding many rights and freedoms as Chancellor, not only religious freedom. He was abandoning the parliamentary democracy that had existed in Austria under the Social Democrats. Lerner saw freedom of the press and the right to jury trials become annulled. She saw the right of assembly suspended. Likewise, workers’ rights and trade unions were curtailed.³⁰

To oppose Dollfuss, Ilona moved further toward Communism, causing Robert to experience his wife’s allegiances as increasing the family’s vulnerability, especially as Jews. However, Ilona’s Communist leanings only drew Lerner closer to her mother and made her more sensitive to workers and the poor.³¹

On Lerner’s walks to school, she passed the residences of the less fortunate—the well-known Karl Marx Hof houses created by the Social Democrats, the Socialist Workers’ Home, and the orphanage where some Jewish children lived. She was attracted to the “giggles” of the children’s

play, “as if the poor did not know they were poor.”³² However, her father had “programmed” her “to socialize only with children who came from suitable families” since he looked down upon “lower-class occupations” and wouldn’t allow her to invite the Jewish children from the orphanage to their home.³³

Lerner was ill at ease with her father’s biases that conflicted with the Jewish value of charity toward the poor, a value she learned not only at home, but also in her congregation and from instruction at school under the Social Democrats. She became further disturbed when members of her congregation would not seat the poor during High Holiday services, or when her grandmother resisted buying eggs from the poor woman who sold eggs to the congregation. Lerner asked herself how Jews could see themselves as being charitable toward the poor and working classes if they excluded them unfairly.³⁴

Lerner focused her growing doubts about organized religion “on the hypocrisy and injustice” she observed in her own congregation—the lack of charity to needy poor people in their midst and the division between the genders that she perceived as unfair. In the end, Lerner decided she could not go through with the *bat mitzvah* for which she had been studying. Becoming a *bat mitzvah* signified the Jewish girl’s being accepted as an adult member of the Jewish community. But this Jewish community had disappointed her. “The decision not to be bat mitzvahed was truly my coming of age. . . . By the time I was fourteen, I had become a political person.” Lerner’s decision was also a defining moment in her relation to organized Judaism: “The community I had tried to find among . . . my co-religionists had disillusioned me.”³⁵

Instead, Lerner found community among other politicized young people, often those at school, Communists advocating for the poor and working classes who were also fighting against Dollfuss’ fascist acts, such as placing the leaders of former left-wing parties and trade unions in internment camps and jails.³⁶

By rejecting her congregation, Lerner may have also been responding out of fear. The political situation for Jews was becoming more dire because the Austrian Nazis, who had been forced underground, rose up to seize power in the *putsch* of July 1934 and assassinated Dollfuss. Though they

failed, Dollfuss' successor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, was a more reactionary clerical fascist who then made Catholicism the official religion of state.³⁷

When the Nazis were finally successful in bloodlessly taking over Austria in 1938, the Catholic country's anti-Semitism was more virulently unleashed. Jews were now humiliated on the streets daily; they were fired from positions in business, government, and university; their businesses were raided and stolen from, and they were imprisoned on trumped-up charges such as "unpatriotic activity."³⁸ Many people in Lerner's circle knew of Jews who committed suicide to avoid imprisonment.³⁹

In this more violent, anti-Semitic atmosphere, it became difficult for Jews to gather together for mutual assistance and support. Simply grouping together in synagogues for communal activities was often dangerous. Armed Nazi gangs would force men from synagogues to use their prayer shawls to wash the floors and toilet bowls of local SS headquarters. They would force the elderly on the streets who looked Jewish to do knee bends until they collapsed.⁴⁰

Members of the Jewish community now had to resort to other, seemingly self-abnegating means to avoid torture— "to make oneself inconspicuous, to blend into a crowd, to make no eye contact with anyone, to call no attention to oneself." Prevented by oppressive conditions from garnering support from one another as members of the Jewish community, Jews practiced self-preservation and invisibility as individuals. When Lerner reflected years later on these behaviors, she did not view these individuals as victims. Rather, she saw them as brave, having the "daily courage" to venture into public areas, pretending "one was still a person with some rights as a citizen or human being."⁴¹

Without her parents' knowledge, Lerner joined a diverse community of Communist student groups that were committed to the independence from Germany of a democratic Austria. She feared that her activities, if discovered, could endanger her family. However, it was her father who was targeted by the Nazis for being a Jewish entrepreneur. Moreover, when one of his female workers had been jailed for being a Communist, he made himself more vulnerable by continuing to pay her salary.⁴² Within weeks after the Nazis annexed Austria, armed men in SA uniforms entered Lerner's home. The Nazis demanded of Lerner, her mother, her grandmother, and her younger sister to know the whereabouts of Lerner's

father, who had narrowly escaped a few days before to neutral Liechtenstein, the small principality on the Rhine between Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.⁴³

When Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Lerner's father had the foresight to establish a satellite pharmacy in Liechtenstein in the event his family would be endangered and forced to emigrate from Austria. Less than a month after the first raid on the Kronstein home, a second raid occurred. This time, Viennese police came into the household, interrogated all the women, and imprisoned Gerda and her mother. The police held them hostage, thinking they could blackmail Lerner's father into signing away his property and his business.⁴⁴ But Lerner's father remained in Liechtenstein unapprehended for the duration of the war.

In prison, Lerner and her mother were separated, but Ilona, who exhibited bravery during the ordeal, found clandestine ways to communicate with her daughter.⁴⁵ For Lerner, the "hours, days, weeks" of her several-month incarceration became "the most important events" of her life. They gave it "a meaning and shape" she "ever since tried to comprehend."⁴⁶

The lesson she learned in prison was the one she would emphasize throughout her feminist scholarship. In order to survive in the Austrian civil prison cell that was built for one but that she shared at times with four others, she could not allow herself to be a "victim": "Victims didn't survive. They could go mad or be beaten to death or starve and choose their own form of death, but if you wanted to survive you could not do it alone and you had to fight with all your strength to keep some sort of social contract." In her cell, she was able to participate in a "fragile community of survival" composed of women who were imprisoned because, like her, they were Jews, or they were considered "other" by the Nazis because they were working-class Socialists.⁴⁷

Lerner formulated in prison the idea that the survival of the marginalized depended upon bonding with others across lines of religion, race, and class. This same theme gained her reputation as an historian after she graduated from Columbia in 1966 and published her major works on women under patriarchy.

Refugee, Not Immigrant

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>