

Sister Courage

Fireweed: A Political Autobiography

Gerda Lerner

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By NANCY SINKOFF

One of the most powerful moments in Gerda Lerner's gripping political autobiography, *Fireweed*, has nothing to do with politics at all. Used (unsuccessfully) as bait by Austrian Nazis to lure her father, a plucky Jewish pharmacist who had fled his native city for safety in Liechtenstein, back to Vienna, Gerda was imprisoned with her mother for five weeks during her last year in *gymnasium*. While in prison, her mother, Ilona Kronstein, a Hungarian Jew with an artistic soul, chewed up the remnants of her meager bread rations, making them into clay from which she constructed make-shift chess pieces for her eldest daughter. A sympathetic guard bestowed the gift upon Gerda and her cellmates on her eighteenth birthday, a sign of her mother's love, creativity, and resistance, values that shaped Lerner's life hence.

In this autobiography, Lerner, a pioneer in the field of women's history, and author of ten books, including *Creation of Patriarchy*, *Why History Matters*, and *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*, has deliberately inverted the first feminist principle, "the personal is political." While her personal story (conflicts with parents, adolescent alienation, sexual awakening, love, marriage, and motherhood) is woven throughout the narrative, Lerner's real purpose is to document her political life from her earliest activism among Viennese socialists to her long involvement with the American Communist Party. Bringing her trade's critical eye to her own past, Lerner describes the remembered, or "constructed" (isn't *all* memory subjective?) events of her life with a historian's dispassion. Her book joins an ever-growing group of memoirs and autobiographies by historians (works by Jews from Germany and Austria include Gershom Scholem's *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*; Jacob Katz's *With My Own Eyes: The Autobiography of an Historian*; and George Mosse's *Confronting History: A Memoir*). In these historical works of autobiographical imagination, the tension between fact and fiction is transparent; after all, the historian's duty is to winnow myth and false memory from "truth." *Fireweed* is no exception and begins with the necessary disclaimer, "To write one's life...is a questionable enterprise, to be sure, for it is a process that ends with one's own life, finite, and inevitably subjective and biased....[But] it need not be a dishonorable enterprise; one can strive for truth without having the illusion that one can find it."

The question of honor looms large in this work because so much of it treats Lerner's political activism in the Communist Party. *Fireweed* affirms the powerful grip that Marxist-Leninist thought, with its guarantee of absolute truth, linear historical progress,

and human freedom, held on so many people, especially intellectuals (and Lerner is nothing if not a highly intelligent rebellious daughter of the Jewish bourgeoisie). It is an important testimony for anyone interested in the memoir literature of German and Austrian refugees, women, and former Communists. Lerner is acutely aware that her long and uncritical involvement with the American CP sorely tests her personal credo of seeing and telling the truth at all costs. A desire to know herself, to break the silence of her political past, to understand -- if not to atone for -- her political choices, are the driving forces behind this book. *Fireweed* is a courageous work.

Lerner's political journey first began in Vienna when Gerda, alienated from the opulent lifestyle of her imperious grandmother and unhappy parents, became "intrigued by the poor," changed her walk to school to encompass working-class districts, and remained riveted to the radio during the crushing of the socialist workers uprising in February 1934. The slow strangulation of her beloved city's diverse political culture under the rule of Chancellor Dollfuss, her self-education in works of social and political theory, involvement with student politics and Bobby Jerusalem, a radical Jewish medical student, and subsequent arrest (due to anti-Semitism not to left-wing activism) sealed Lerner's political orientation.

Once in the United States, Lerner tried out a number of professions and began to write (poems, short stories, a novel). As she became an American and her life dramatically improved, the noose tightened around Europe's Jews: a vicious paradox that haunts her until this day. Her marriage to Bobby dissolved painfully, but amicably, and she soon met Carl Lerner, a struggling film editor who was already a Communist. Their early collaboration writing a script for the celebration of the German-American Day for Peace and Progress foreshadowed thirty-three years together as husband and wife, writers and activists. Gerda joined the Party in 1946. Outraged by the use of the Atom bomb on Japanese civilians, she threw herself into politics, canvassing for Jerry Voorhis against Richard Nixon in the race for the House in her district, participating in the Congress of American Women and fighting against discriminatory housing policies. Although marked as a "Red," Carl Lerner escaped the worst savagings of McCarthyism by leaving Hollywood and building a successful film career in New York. But the fear- and paranoia-fraught years 1947-1949 left their toll, obliterating the historian's most important tool: interpretive clarity. Lerner concedes that her reconstruction of the blacklist years is fragmentary.

The close of the book is a coda of self-confrontation, with Lerner acknowledging her blindness to the lies perpetuated by Stalin's true believers. Yet, she does not disavow her Communism and continues to believe that the Party did good work by focusing on domestic issues (racial equality, socio-economic justice, nonviolence and anti-nuclear activism) to make America more inclusive. How one reads her present self-criticism about the Party's obeisance to the USSR will depend on one's assessment of American Communism: was it, like so much in American history, exceptional? Did the US Communist Party create an outlet for American progressives that was more democratic than Europe's Communist parties, even if its rhetoric and bureaucracy succumbed to Comintern control? Or was she, like so many people of good will, a front for Stalin's

butchery and, therefore, complicit in his crimes? These questions, asked so long ago by Albert Camus and democratic American socialists like the late Irving Howe, are not fully answered.

Without rejecting her past, Lerner now embraces a view of the world replete with complexity, contradiction and human frailty. Gone is the absolutism of the 1930s and classical Marxism, although her work as a historian of women is informed by the Old Left's concerns with social class and race. By writing *Fireweed*, Lerner has found comfort in the world of words, not deeds.

Yet, at 82, she is neither politically nor intellectually complacent. Let me end with an anecdote:

I first heard Lerner speak over twenty years ago. The male colleague who welcomed her told the audience, which palpably groaned, that she was the mother of two children and had written several books. I remember that Lerner corrected him by emphasizing her scholarly output. When I recently heard her read from *Fireweed*, I introduced myself and recalled the incident. Still spry, Lerner wryly corrected *my* memory. She had tweaked her dopey colleague by saying, "Thank you for that most unusual introduction, but I have a slight correction to make. I have written six books and my husband and I have produced two children."

A quintessential Gerda Lerner reaction: critical, didactic, and truthful, expressed with her trademark indefatigability. *Fireweed* is an unrepentant, highly self-conscious remembering of the politics that shaped an American historian's life and work.

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