



“A WOMAN OF VALOR”

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Ernestine Rose

by Shirley Ranz

Susan B. Anthony called her one of the first pioneers for women’s suffrage, and kept her photograph on her study wall. She is considered the first Jewish-American feminist. Her favorite expression was, “Agitate, Agitate!” There is a historical society at Brandeis University dedicated to researching her life. Who was this woman?

Ernestine Susmond Potowski was born in Piotrkow, Poland in 1810, the daughter of the town’s rabbi. She insisted on learning Hebrew and Talmud, although this was uncommon for girls. She was forever questioning what seemed irrational in the texts and her teachers complained of her heresies.

The Jews were allowed by the government to control their internal affairs, and disputes within the community were settled by the rabbi and a council. When Ernestine was 16, her father betrothed her to a man she didn’t want to marry. As a dowry he had given to her fiancée, her mother’s inheritance. Ernestine refused to honor a contract she had not consented to. She begged her fiancée to return the dowry, and cancel the contract, but he refused. Knowing that she could not appeal to the Jewish Community Board, which was headed by her father, she did something unheard of. She secretly went to the Polish court to restore her right to her mother’s inheritance. She won her case. On her way home, since she was now free not to marry, she decided to return the money to her father.

While she had been pursuing her case in the Polish court, her father had married a girl the same age as Ernestine, 16. Shortly after, she left Piotrkow, never to return again. She made her way to Berlin, only to discover that Polish Jews could not remain in Germany unless a Prussian citizen, with property offered security for them. In addition, a Polish Jew could not conduct any business. Refusing to convert to Christianity, and encouraged by her recent victory in the Polish court she decided to tackle this injustice. She wrote a letter to the King of Prussia and to her surprise it was answered. She appeared before him and argued against the law. Although the law was not changed, the King granted her an exception.

In order to support herself, she invented a room deodorizer. She spent 3 years in Germany where she saw poverty and oppression. She spent some time in Holland, then in France. In France she witnessed revolts against tyrannical rulers, who had overturned the gains in civil rights established by Napoleon. She heard that a revolt had broken out in Poland and tried to return to fight for the independence of her homeland, but she was forced back. Then she made her way to London.

In England she supported herself by selling her room deodorizer and by giving German and Hebrew lessons. There she met a radical social reformer, Robert Owen, which turned out to be one of the most important events in her life. Owenism, a form of utopian socialism, became the guiding principle of her life.

Owen believed that man was the product of his environment. He owned a cotton mill, where he built new homes for the workers, and set up the first school for working class children in England. He shortened the worker's hours and proved that they were more productive. In spite of this other manufacturers refused to listen. Owen's theories spurred the beginnings of labor unions and cooperative societies. Ernestine impressed Owen and he invited her to speak in London. Though her English vocabulary was limited, and she spoke with a foreign accent, she enthralled her audience. This marked the beginning of her career as a public speaker. She later became known as, "Queen of the Platform". She married fellow Owenite, William Rose, a silversmith and jeweler, and they left shortly after for America.

In 1836, they made their home on, what was then, fashionable Grand Street, where her husband set up his silversmith shop. Ernestine learned that despite America's claims to freedom and democracy, a married woman had few rights. Any property she owned or inherited, legally belonged to her husband. He was free by law to gamble or drink it away. If she worked, her salary could be claimed by her husband to do with as he pleased. If the marriage ended in divorce, the husband was automatically awarded custody of the children. Even if he was judged unfit, his parents were awarded custody, rather than the mother. And women had no right to vote. They were, however, compelled to pay taxes to support a government that gave them no say in the passage of laws that affected their lives.

A New York State legislator had introduced a bill to protect a married woman's property, but it stood almost no chance of passing. Ernestine decided to draft a petition supporting the bill. Daily, she went from house to house, and after 5 months she had only 5 signatures. By 1840, the petitions had grown to a sizeable campaign, and Ernestine together with other women from around New York State, invaded the legislature in Albany, to argue for passage of the bill. Ernestine appeared before the committee 5 times. It took another 8 years before the bill finally became law. Through this campaign, she made lifelong connections to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

She soon made contact with the abolitionist movement and became one of its public speakers. Men flocked to hear her, not because they were interested in her ideas, but because of the novelty of a woman speaker. They expected to see a woman making a fool of herself, and they came to mock. She disappointed them.

She lectured also on free, secular schooling for children and was frequently charged with being an infidel. She challenged pro-slavery clergymen to debates, who backed down, claiming their religion forbade them from fighting with a woman. In 1847 she traveled to Charleston, SC, straight into the heart of slavery, to lecture, despite threats. She hired a hall, paid for publicity, and gave an eloquent anti-slavery speech. She usually paid her own traveling expenses and rarely accepted a speaker's fee. She was able to do this by manufacturing her own brand of cologne. She also continued to support the Owenist movement and traveled to their colony in upstate New York.

Back in June 1840, abolitionists had come together in London to hold a convention. Among the American delegation were Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. When they presented their credentials, they were refused on the grounds of their sex. In protest, William Lloyd Garrison, one of America's foremost abolitionists, refused to participate in the convention, and sat with the women in the gallery. From this episode was born the idea of a Woman's Rights Convention, the first of which took place in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. There a Declaration of Sentiments was written, modeled on the Declaration of Independence. A typical reaction of the press was an editorial, which appeared in the Albany Times. "What has happened in Seneca Falls could bring the end of the world."

Ernestine attended every National Women's Rights Convention from 1850-1869. She traveled to over 23 states, and was considered the best female orator in mid 19th c America. She spoke to the new immigrants in German and French. She is credited with bringing the Women's Suffrage movement to Michigan.

Although she had removed herself from Judaism, concluding that all religions were irrational and oppressive to women, she responded immediately to an anti-Semitic editorial, written in a free-thought newspaper to which she had frequently contributed. For ten weeks, letters, which were printed, went back and forth between her and the editor, in which she presented a critique of anti-Semitism and described Jewish contributions to secular culture.

Her lack of recognition by earlier historians may have been due to the fact that she was an outspoken atheist, an immigrant, and a Jew in a largely Protestant reform movement. Susan B. Anthony considered her, together with Mary Wollstonecraft, and Frances Wright, to have pioneered the cause of women's suffrage.

In 1869 she and her husband returned to live in England, where she continued to work for social justice until her death in London in 1892 at the age of 82. She was buried in Highgate Cemetery and in 2002 a dedication ceremony was held there for the 110th anniversary of her death.