

Introduction



WHEN MARIE SYRKIN died, she left behind a collection of unpublished poems written in the last decade of her life. Her poem, “Second Chance,” was composed when she was eighty-seven years old.

SECOND CHANCE

(Haley’s Comet returns in 1986)

Only the very old will see Haley’s Comet twice.
In 1910 I heard, “Look child, one chance!”
Eager, I saw light streaking.
Now another chance looms in the heavens:
Haley’s Comet will keep its date with the sun.

On this sad planet
I have had my fill of seeing.
I do not want to see Haley’s Comet again.¹

Marie Syrkin lived just seven weeks short of ninety years. And what years they were. How fully she lived them. Born on March 23, 1899, she died on February 1, 1989, her life virtually spanning the entire twentieth century. Easily she could have said, “Been there, done that.” Her late-life poem belies a lifelong natural optimism; but she had been there and had done that and had seen much. By 1986, perhaps too much.

At this writing we are in the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century. That long stretch of time since Syrkin’s death may account for my own astonishment when I say her name and the response is “Marie who?” That is too bad. What those who have never heard of Marie Syrkin do not know is that she led a life that is the quin-

tessence of the romantic novel, the adventure tale, the report from a war zone, letters from the home front, letters between lovers, collected poems, the scholars' research, all these and more; and everything, despite mistakes, with an uncommon humanity, with an unshakeable sense of justice, with values beyond the self. More astonishing is the infinite variety of roles she played in her own self-created story: immigrant child, adolescent dreamer, daughter of a famous father, lover, wife, mother, divorcée, muse, friend, teacher, journalist, polemicist, editor, professor, intellectual, poet, and finally, doyenne of the American Labor Zionist movement. Her life was both exemplary and unique.

Marie Syrkin, daughter of Nachman Syrkin, the theoretician of Socialist Zionism, emigrated to the United States at the age of nine. She was a very beautiful child with an extraordinary intellect who at this tender age could speak four languages. Within a year of coming to America, she added English. Marie was an outstanding student in elementary school, but became a mediocre student, except for English, in high school. She seemed afloat, drifting, dreaming, a voracious reader of nineteenth-century novels and poetry. There is nothing at this stage to suggest that Marie Syrkin was to become a leader of Labor Zionism. If anything, her adolescent diary shows that she might become a woman of *belles lettres*; and this is what she really always wanted and what would have happened, had she not chosen at a certain point in her life to use her literary gifts in the service of Zionism and the Jewish people. Though she wrote poetry and published it throughout her life, that is not why she is remembered — or at least should be — today.

In some ways, Marie's life follows the psycho-social model described by Erik Erikson in his study of gifted men (and there is no reason why his paradigm cannot be applied to gifted women as well). Erikson describes a period in such a young person's life that he calls a "moratorium"; among the gifted, this takes place between the years twenty and thirty. During this period, the subject appears to be unfocussed, experiments with different roles, rebels, has feelings of self-doubt, drifts, with no clear goals. It is, however, a period of preparation for the time when some event or some act, whether deliberate or unconscious, galvanizes the individual into self-awareness and she/he begins to achieve goals. This is a fair description of the trajectory of Marie Syrkin's chosen course. After the death of her mother when she was sixteen, after an elopement at the age of eighteen followed by an annulment, a failed second marriage, the death of her first child, the death of her father, and

the abandonment of her hope to earn a Ph.D., at the age of thirty Syrkin emerged from these years with a new sense of purpose and a determination to steer her life on a course she had deliberately chosen. Erikson calls the successful negotiation of the “moratorium” period, “the virtue of fidelity” — that is, the ability to accept society with all its imperfections, to find a place in society to which one can contribute and commit one’s self.

With Zionism, Syrkin put her skills to use in written and oral debate, but she also took the practical step of obtaining a teaching license and teaching in a New York City high school in order to care for her son. After marrying the poet Charles Reznikoff in 1930, she continued to teach, to do on-the-spot reporting that took her to Palestine, to Europe, and around America. Under an unusual divorce agreement (even for the present time), Marie’s son lived alternate years with his mother and with his father, making it possible for Marie to fulfill her own aspirations without neglecting the care of the child. She would even insist, late in life, that though she lived her life convinced that sexism cannot be condoned, she also agreed with Freud that biology *is* destiny. Here, as in so many of her intellectual encounters, Marie did not hew to a doctrinaire line; her arguments were constructed out of a combination of intellect, experience, and straight-talk.

Often Marie was accused of being too liberal; but just as often she was accused of being a conservative. Willing to take on the formidable adversaries of her time, she sharply rebutted such eminences as Hannah Arendt and Arnold Toynbee, and she publicly rebuked Ben-Gurion, a man she venerated, in the pages of the *Jerusalem Post*. She gave Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* a bad review. She signed public declarations for the first Peace Now statement and against the Begin government for its Lebanon operation; she signed on to the supporters of the new *Tikkun* magazine, but removed her name after the first issue. Because Marie Syrkin was never afraid of taking risks, her writing is often challenging, frequently controversial, and usually witty. Moreover, it is always readable, never indulging in circumlocution, political euphemism, or academic jargon.

Finally, Marie Syrkin is one of the few American Jewish women intellectuals to have played an active role for over fifty years in the unfolding of events in Europe, Israel, and America, not only as a reporter, but as an actor in the tragic drama of the Holocaust and its aftermath, in the creation of the State of Israel, and at home in America, as well.

At the age of fifty, Marie Syrkin achieved her lifelong dream of becoming an academic. She was hired by Dr. Abram L. Sachar to be a professor of literature at the newly formed Brandeis University. That was a felicitous move for Professor Syrkin as well as for me, for this is where we first met. I had enrolled in Syrkin's course, "Survey of British Literature." I loved literature — but even more, I welcomed the chance to have a female professor. There were no other such role models for women at Brandeis in those years. In the aftermath of a dashed-off paper on *King Lear*, written over a very busy December vacation (and partially derived from a cousin's paper on the same subject), I awaited the return of my work. But there was to be no grade — only the words, "see me." I did. I was given a chance to rewrite without hope of a grade better than B+; but I was also invited to a home-cooked dinner to discuss *King Lear*. That was the inauspicious beginning of a lifelong friendship.

After I left the Boston area, Marie and I kept in touch by handwritten letter, by telephone, and sometimes in person during her periodic visits to New York or my visits to Boston. We saw more of each other once she retired to Manhattan. But after she moved to Santa Monica, we had to return to our telephone and mail connection — no e-mail then. But I did visit Marie in California a number of times — she had given me an open invitation to make use of the sleep sofa in her living room, and over the years, I did so.

In mid-January of 1989, I went once more to spend a week with my friend and mentor at her Santa Monica apartment, this time to gather material for an article in *Midstream* that was to be a celebration of her ninetieth birthday on March 23. A few days after my visit, Marie fell into a coma, and blessedly within a week, on February 1, she died. I say "blessedly" because when I arrived at her apartment she immediately asked me, "What would you do if I collapsed while you were here? Would you revive me?" Seriously taken aback, I responded, "What would you want me to do?" "If my mind is gone, don't," was her peremptory reply.

I soon noted that Marie's mind certainly was not gone! The week was filled with her acute answers to my questions, sometimes with her sharp and sometimes less than gentle retorts to my own pronouncements, sometimes with gossip and sometimes with memories. I recalled how a few years before in New York we had gone together to see a play about Emily Dickinson, *The Belle of Amherst*. Upon leaving the theater, Marie had commented that she liked Julie Harris, but the play left out

“the dark side” of the poet. This memory led to our decision to go to the movies the next day to see *The Dead*, based on the James Joyce story; she loved it and was especially moved by the two elderly sisters, especially the one who sang “Arrayed for the Bridal.” That night she proposed that we watch one of her favorite TV programs: *Murder, She Wrote*, starring Angela Lansbury as a woman writer-detective. Surprised as I was by this pop-culture choice, it was not hard to see the connection among play, story, and TV serial. It was feminism. Marie was drawn to the portrayal of women’s experience in the arts and in all stages of life. Hadn’t she herself chosen to write the biography of her friend Golda Meir, a woman she held up as a model of feminism? And hadn’t she recently written the foreword to the second edition of the 1932 volume of *The Plough Woman*, memoirs of young women Zionists who had emigrated to Palestine during the first years of the twentieth century?

For all her adult life, Marie considered herself to be a feminist with feminist concerns, but she could not be called ideological. Her feminism was complex and idiosyncratic and must be interpreted in the context of its historical moment. After all, she was born into feminism, her mother having been a socialist revolutionary activist. In a 1983 interview in *Moment* magazine, Marie remarked, “You don’t have to tell me to keep my family name; I kept my name long before I knew that was the thing to do. I’ve always used my name, through several marriages, strange as that may appear. And you don’t have to tell me that a woman has to be independent. I was always independent, and very energetically so.”²

By the 1960s and 1970s in the early years of the contemporary women’s movement, Syrkin, then in her post-retirement years, took some positions that appeared to be in opposition to more radical feminist programs. When the movement adopted the anti-Freudian slogan that “biology is *not* destiny,” Marie Syrkin demurred. After participating in a conference on Jewish feminism held in Jerusalem in 1984, in which leading feminists took part, Marie wrote a piece in *Midstream* titled “Does Feminism Clash with Jewish National Need?” Much of the agenda was predictable, she wrote, but a number of intriguing questions arose. Obviously, one was the question posed in the title. This was surprising because it came from religious feminists who suggested that there may be a conflict not only between feminism and Orthodox Judaism, but also between feminism and the national survival of the Jewish people. “Insofar as feminism liberates women from traditional roles and encourages life-styles antithetical to procreation and the fostering of the

family,” she points out, “feminist ideology affects the Jewish future. How reconcile a Jewish agenda aimed at preserving a threatened national entity and the feminist platform?”

Syrkin does not answer the question. She simply states that

freedom of choice is a right, not a privilege. Freedom demands that it be exercised honestly in response to genuine individual needs, not out of deference to fashion. Whatever the choice, a price will be paid by men as well as women. Only the most fortunate, energetic, and gifted can have the best of both worlds. And, as has already been mentioned, Jewish feminists, religious and secular, are troubled by the conflict between feminist and national agenda, in addition to the conflict women face between deep emotional impulses and compelling desires for intellectual and professional growth. Catch-phrases like “anatomy is not destiny” cast no light. Anatomy obviously affects destiny, though it need not determine the outcome.

During our last week together, Marie showed no signs of intellectual impairment, though she had deteriorated physically. She was visibly frail, and, though uncomplaining, in constant pain from the cancer she refused to reveal to me. Nonetheless, her voice was vigorous, her words straightforward, with the timbre of a much younger and stronger woman, and with the assurance and lucidity that marked the seventy years of her extraordinary career. I had come to interview Marie for an essay that was to have been a celebration of the marvel of her still acute mind; but, unfortunately, it became instead a memorial essay. I choose to repeat some of that *Midstream* memorial here, because it had been written with the clarity of immediate recall:

In these last days before her death, she took final stock of her lifelong work as a Labor Zionist. Aware of the current trend among many historians of revisiting the events and devaluing the accomplishments of Zionism, she asserted in her still strong and contentious voice, “something tremendous has been achieved!” Yes, she recognized the present difficulties and failures of Labor Zionism, but she insisted that those who now proclaim that the “myth” of Israel is dead are mistaken. It was no fable. Israel, she maintained, is an exemplar of what *can* be done. “Even if it lasts only forty, fifty years, what that state achieved can never be erased because it shows the potential of idealism. It achieved something in the political structure of the world. The phrase ‘next year in Jerusalem’ became clothed in flesh as the vision became reality to a greater

extent than could have been imagined.” Not one to gloss over even the most lamentable of facts, Marie admitted to regret over the present state of affairs — the re-election of Yizhak Shamir — but she went on to explain that the adaptation of the dream to realities is “merely the price of survival. I regret,” she said sadly, “the failure of Labor to increase its hold over the population — because of the errors of Labor and the megalomania of Likud, but still Israel has lived, it suffered, it flourished. It is not lost and there is no telling how history will unfold. Study the record,” she advised, “and you will see that it was done with blood, sweat, and tears; the so-called ‘myth’ was created by people who did not participate.”

My last days with Marie were a gift. She would sit curled in a large wing chair that accentuated her frail small frame, her back against one arm, her legs incongruously draped over the other arm as we sipped tea, recalled past events, and argued current affairs. She was preparing a rebuttal to Benny Morris’ book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. “He’s Jacob Morris’ son, you know. His father’s turning in his grave,” she muttered. Had she lived to see Morris’ revision of the book, she would have raised an eyebrow and smiled in smug satisfaction. She was, however, delighted with my gift to her — Yehoshafat Harkabi’s then-new book, *Israel’s Fateful Hour*. It was, she said, exactly what she wanted. In our last encounter, Marie’s wit had been sharp, and so, often, was her tongue. Yet she had not lost the capacity for tenderness and friendship. Her clear dark eyes retained their glint, and her celebrated beauty was still apparent. The opening lines of a poem by John Donne, one of her favorite poets, came to me as we sat talking for the last time.

Nor Spring nor Summer beauty hath such grace
As I have seen in one Autumnal face.