

## Books

# A Historian Who Takes Sides

**Fireweed: A Political Autobiography**  
by Gerda Lerner  
Temple University Press, 2002.  
377 pages. \$34.50

By Barbara Ransby

Most biographies and autobiographies of accomplished people focus on the years of their greatest acclaim. In telling her own life story, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, Gerda Lerner, one of the preeminent pioneers in the field of women's history, decided to write about the first half of her life, the obscure half. It is the part of her life that those of us familiar with her scholarship have known little about until now. These are the experiences that shaped and influenced the kind of historian and feminist she later became. Today in her eighties, Lerner is a professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin, author of twelve major books, including *The Creation of Patriarchy*, dozens of essays, and the recipient of numerous honorary degrees, book awards, and other accolades.

It was not until the 1960s that Gerda Lerner became a professional historian, but before that she was an engaged participant in some of the most pivotal events of the first half of the twentieth century. It is these events that are the focus of her memoir. *Fireweed* seems cathartic for Lerner, who resisted the call to write a book about her career as a feminist

historian. She chose instead to retrace the events that preceded her professional life, a leftwing political past that for "complex reasons" she has kept hidden. The motivation she expresses straightforwardly in the introduction: "I do not want to end my life in a closet of my own making." Still, coming out of the closet proved both painful and fulfilling.

Gerda Kronstein was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Austria in 1920, and came of age in Vienna just as the Nazi reign of terror began to

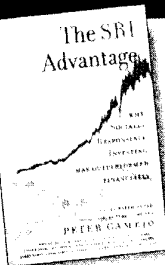
engulf Europe. She witnessed and, in her own small ways, resisted the growing fascist movement before fleeing for her life. Her family managed to flee Vienna just after the Nazis took over, but only she made it to the United States with the help of a feisty and unfaithful young socialist named Bobby Jensen.

Lerner writes with emotion and great detail of her eighteenth birthday spent in an Austrian jail, the tensions and emotional tugs of war within her fractious family, her romance



Barbara Ransby is an associate professor of African-American studies and history at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the executive director of the Center for Public Intellectuals. Her biography of civil rights activist Ella Baker will be published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2003.

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with an older man, and her embrace of leftwing politics. Step by step, her memoir carries us through the experiences, relationships, and historic events that have remained in her mind's eye all these years. There was Marta, the Yugoslav Communist who was her high school friend and political mentor; her ever-changing relationship with her bohemian and unconventional mother; and her stint in the Socialist Youth Camp in Wales as a teenager. Through wars, invasion, forced exile, a Depression, and political persecution, Gerda Kronstein becomes Gerda Lerner: a woman, a wife, a mother, a Marxist, a post-Marxist, a feminist, and finally a scholar.

The book is divided into four parts: "Beginnings," "Becoming an American," "Becoming a Radical," and "In the Eye of the Storm." After arriving in the United States on the eve of the U.S. entry into World War II, Lerner divorces her first husband, meets and marries her second, Carl

Lerner, and takes various odd jobs to help support the family. She worked as an x-ray technician in Harlem and an office worker in the garment industry in lower Manhattan before moving to Los Angeles, where Carl pursued a career in the movie industry. Carl was a Communist Party member when the couple met in 1941; Gerda joined five years later. She canvassed for Henry Wallace in 1948, and seemed most proud of her involvement in the Congress of American Women, a peace and social justice group with communist and noncommunist members and chapters nationwide. There she worked with African American and international women activists on issues ranging from child care to world peace. She later burned the group's papers out of fear during the height of the anti-Communist witch-hunts—something she regretted, especially once she became a historian.

Throughout her life, she casts herself as somewhat of an outsider. As a Jew in Nazi-occupied Austria, she was a persecuted minority. In the United States after 1941, she was technically an "enemy alien." She was a Communist during the Cold War, and a former Marxist when debates about socialism and Marxism were raging within feminist circles of the 1970s.

Perhaps the strength of Lerner's writings and insights has to do with this marginal location. The Palestinian American intellectual and activist Edward Said argues that "exile" is the best metaphor for an honest intellectual who pledges allegiance to no dogma or orthodoxy. Standing at a distance from convention and power, the exile has a better vantage point from which to analyze and critique the world. And this honest analysis of the world, and now herself, is what has defined Lerner's life's work.

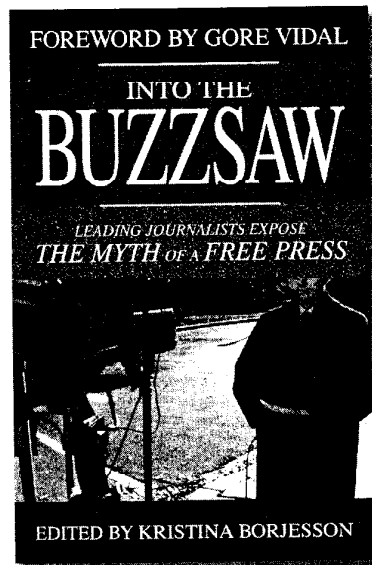
Gerda Lerner was not a spectator but a participant in history. She took sides, changed sides, fought for her positions, and engaged the world as

## INTO THE BUZZSAW

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 Edited by Kristina Borjesson  
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her own understandings and priorities evolved over the decades. At her core there was a fighter for justice—with different weapons and on different battlefields.

Ever the historian, Lerner discusses the methodology and the limits of autobiography as a genre. Thinking out loud and allowing her readers to eavesdrop, she entertains the possibility of summing herself up in a different way. Halfway through the book, as author and subject, she pauses to argue with herself about which version of her life she might recount. At one point she confesses: "As I piece this story together, the strands of it keep escaping me." Faded memories, lost documents, frayed and contradictory accounts are all challenges to the historian, even the autobiographer.

As a biographer myself, I can sympathize with Lerner: I have often thought I would have had a greater advantage if I had interviewed my subject and been there at critical junctures to see things for myself. Lerner reassures me that having been an eyewitness to the story you are telling is still not a guarantee of perfect clarity and perspective. There are still choices to be made, voids to be filled, and ultimately an interpretative framework to be imposed.

Lerner acknowledges her disappointments. She never became the successful American writer she hoped to become in 1939. Her first novel, twelve years in the works, was rejected by U.S. publishers and finally published in Germany. Her second, *No Farewell*, was published by a small independent publishing group she formed with Henry and Dorothy Kraus. There was the unfortunate marriage to Bobby Jensen and the unresolved relationship with Ili, her mother, an eccentric and sometimes aloof bohemian who remained in France in the war years to pursue her painting career.

McCarthyism was an especially trying time for Lerner. Even her

physician, whom she had trusted, named the names of some of her patients to save herself. The Lerner were luckily not among them. Still, they were followed by the FBI and lived in constant fear, suppressing their own doubts that the cause to which they had devoted themselves so thoroughly was not all they had hoped it to be. "I checked my critical faculties when it came to that subject [the Soviet Union]," Lerner writes self-critically, "and instead accepted what I wanted to hear on faith."

If there is a weakness in this book it is that it ends on an unnecessarily defensive and doubtful note.

Lerner says she neither "regrets nor disowns" her political past. However, the statement is not totally convincing. One page earlier, she admits to "having failed" in her effort "to lead a conscious, an examined life and to practice what I preach." She blames herself because she "fell uncritically for lies I should have been able to penetrate and perceive as such."

Thousands of people joined or supported the Communist Party—from W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson to Angela Davis and Charlene Mitchell—not out of weakness but out of strength and conviction that they were willing to sacrifice their own personal security to try to build a more just society. That is nothing to apologize for. Many of them made mistakes, some struggled against Stalinist tendencies and for democratic practices within the party, and like Lerner, some parted ways and continued to fight for justice in other capacities.

If her narrative had been a little less afraid and given readers a bit more of the positive and compassionate reasons she was drawn to the Communist Party in the first place and stayed in it, instead of focusing more on why she did not leave sooner, and if she spent more time explaining how precisely she came to feminism, we could take away a more complete vision of a life that, by any standards, is quite remarkable. ♦



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