

By Bennett Muraskin

In this series we are featuring profiles of leading secular and humanistic Jews from various countries and eras. These profiles are written by Bennett Muraskin, a regular contributor to *Outlook*, *Humanistic Judaism and Jewish Currents*. Many of these profiles appear in Bennett's book *Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Humanistic Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman*, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Center for Cultural Judaism.

Annette Rubinstein, Marxist literary critic, social activist and educator, began her life of social activism in the 1930s, fighting for the rights of the unemployed and for aid to the Spanish Republic. A leading Marxist intellectual, she was closely associated with *Science & Society* (founded in 1936) and *Monthly Review* (founded in 1949). She was an avid supporter of the *National Guardian*, the weekly leftist newspaper founded in 1948, which reciprocated by sponsoring her lecture tours across the U.S. She wrote literary criticism for *Mainstream*, a communist-leaning journal that published from 1946 until 1963. Since its inception in 1958, she contributed to *Jewish Currents* and for many years served on its Editorial Advisory Council.

The child of immigrant socialists, Rubinstein qualified for Barnard College at age 15, but was not admitted due to an anti-Jewish quota. She attended New York University (NYU) instead, and in 1933 Rubinstein earned a PhD in philosophy from Columbia University. She wasted no time in putting theory into practice by first working as a social worker for an early New Deal relief agency and then in the following year joining the faculty of the Robert Louis Stevenson School, an innovative private primary and secondary school, where she served as teacher and principal. In 1952 she was forced to resign from the Stevenson School due to charges brought by the New York State Attorney General alleging communist ties. She also taught at avowedly left-wing institutions such as the Jefferson School of Social Sciences and the New York Marxist School—now known as the Brecht Forum—at NYU and various universities in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. She was proudest of a program she initiated for Puerto Rican WWII veterans at the Stevenson School under the GI Bill of Rights.

Rubinstein was heavily investigated and placed under surveillance by the FBI. During the 1950s, she was summoned to testify before the HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) as well as Joseph McCarthy's own Senate committee. When questioned as to her membership in the Communist Party, she

Annette Rubinstein (1910 – 2007)



took the Fifth Amendment to protect herself from prosecution, although it is clear that she was a party member from the early

1930s through the early 1950s. Unlike many others, she quit before Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's crimes in 1956. In her case, the breaking point was the CP's failure to support the American Labor Party's candidate for mayor of New York City in 1953. Acquiring her FBI file through the Freedom of Information Act, she discovered that it weighed over 18 pounds.

Later, Rubinstein came to admire the communist regime in the People's Republic of China. She visited there for the first time in 1972, returned to teach English and American Literature in 1982-83 and 1987-88 and headed up a U.S.-China friendship society.

Rubinstein was involved in many campaigns to free alleged political prisoners, including Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Morton Sobell, the Attica Brothers and the Panther 21, by speaking out at rallies and in some cases writing pamphlets on their behalf to garner public support. During the civil rights era, she organized to de-segregate New York City schools and in 1970 she edited a book *Schools Against Children: The Case for Community Control*.

Rubinstein's enduring passion was literature. In 1953 her two-volume *The Great Tradition in English Literature from Shakespeare to Shaw* appeared. In 1986, she published *American Literature: Root and Flowers, Significant Writers and Literary Movements 1775-1955*. In these books and in numerous articles, courses and lectures, she provided a Marxist analysis of English and American literature, emphasizing the theme of resistance to oppression. In her last public appearance, on April 28, 2007 at the Brecht Forum, she lectured on the overlooked radical views and causes championed by famous English or Irish literary figures such as Swift, Milton, Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley and Blake.

In the world of politics, Rubinstein became a key advisor to Vito Marcantonio, the American Labor Party Congressman from Harlem from 1934-36 and 1938-1950. She edited and introduced a collection of his speeches and writings which appeared in 1956 as *I Vote My Conscience*. In 1949 she directly entered the political arena as the ALP candidate for the New York State Assembly and the U.S. Congress. For a number of years she served as the Vice-Chair of the ALP. In 1958, in the wake of the Khrushchev revelations condemning Stalin, elements of the recently disbanded American Labor Party, including former CP members, joined with the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party to form an Independent Socialist slate to contend for state offices in New York. Rubinstein was a key player in this experiment. John McManus, managing editor of the *National Guardian*, ran for

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governor; Rubinstein for lieutenant governor and the radical humanist Corliss Lamont for Senator.

Although childless herself, during World War Two and throughout the 1940s Rubinstein advocated for child welfare as Executive Secretary of the Committee for the Care of Young Children in Wartime and President of the West Side Child Care Council.

In searching the three *Jewish Currents Readers*, which present the highlights of the magazine from 1956 to 1986, I came across one article co-authored by Rubinstein and Morton Stavis in 1980, "An Open Letter to Our Friends Who Support the PLO." She and Stavis argued persuasively that both sides in the conflict needed to clearly and unequivocally embrace a two-state solution. This was but one of approximately 35 articles and book reviews she contributed from 1958 to 2005, not counting the six she wrote for *Jewish Life* between 1949 and 1957. Her final appearance in *Jewish Currents* in May-June 2005 was a review of a book about Jewish partisans during World War Two.

Annette Rubinstein was a generous person. She typically took in students to share her uptown New York apartment and for many years hosted *Jewish Currents*'

quarterly Editorial Advisory Council meetings. In 2002, she donated her papers to the Tamiment Library at New York University, where they are available for researchers. She continued to mentor young radicals and sustain the Brecht Forum as a teacher and advisor until her death. Over her long and productive life, she counted Paul Robe-

son, W.E.B. Dubois and Dorothy Parker among her friends.

In summing up her personal philosophy, Rubinstein liked to quote the Talmudic dictum: "It is not your task to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it altogether." Compassionate to the very end, she left her money to a soup kitchen and her body to a medical school. ♦

Jottings by Sylvia Friedman

* I'd like to tell you about some great plans afoot for Vancouver over the Labour Day weekend. The Peretz Centre for Secular Jewish Culture—our residence since we moved *Outlook* here from Toronto—is hosting a West Coast Regional Conference for Secular and Humanist Cultural Jews, which promises to be a very exciting event. People from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Victoria and Vancouver will be attending. Apparently the weekend is open to youth and oldsters hungry for food for thought on the question of secularism, among other topics. But besides that, there will be time for laughing, eating, singing, shmoozing and playing. For more information call Leslie or Shane Dyson at 604-857-0115 or e-mail dysonf2f@telus.net. I hope to see you there!

* I always find it difficult having to tell you about our grievous losses, and it never gets any easier, in spite of it becoming a more frequent occurrence. This past while has dealt us some very painful blows.

Our Editor, Carl, just lost his father SID ROSENBERG, in Bloomington, Indiana. Sid was a man who possessed a rich intellect, strong principles and a great sense of humour—and lucky for us, he passed on these wonderful attributes to his son Carl. Sid had been a bassoonist in the Israel Philharmonic, the Vancouver Symphony, and the Montreal Symphony. He was a well-loved teacher at McGill and the Indiana University School of Music. He was a most warm and generous supporter of *Outlook*. Our hearts go out to Carl and his wife Delta, to his twin sister Anne and her husband Joseph, to his half-sister Nori and her daughter Melina, and to Sid's companion Betty Mintz.

Less than a week after Sid's passing, we received word that one of my dearest friends, LEE SCHECHTER of Toronto, passed away. Lee was for many, many years the mainstay of the inner workings of the UJPO, of both the Toronto and National offices. She was literally the "Encyclopaedia UJPonica." She was a life-long supporter of the progressive movement and an ardent reader and supporter of *Outlook*. And to top it all off, she still found the time to be a most gracious host to out-of-town guests and a fantastic cook. A better friend you couldn't have wished for. I embrace you Maxine and Marty, and the kids David and Jane, Elissa, Robin, Rachel and Cyndy, and the little ones Hayden and Max and brother Irving Swartz.

To one of my life-long dearest friends, Fanny Narwa in Paris, France, on the loss of her sweet sister BERNICE in Chicago and darling brother JACKIE in Toronto, within two days of each other, our hearts go out to you and Phillippe, Remi and Mureille.

Our condolences go out to Shirley Church of Vancouver on the loss of her husband JOHN CHURCH who was a valued member of our *Outlook* Collective for a number of years.

Our deepest sympathy to Diana Ralph of Ottawa on the recent loss of her brother.

My apologies to Honey and Oscar Ross of Toronto, for not mentioning them in my eulogy for sister Rita Bergman in the last issue. My deepest sympathy to you.

* And now I am pleased to be able to close on a happy note. A hearty *mazel tov* to Louise Miller of Vancouver on the marriage of her son DAVID to NESSIA.

And that's all I have room for. Enjoy the rest of your summer!

Sylvia

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