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Ethel Gross: Not Just a Jewish Divorcee?

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Ethel Gross (1886-1976) was much more than the jarring title of this book would suggest. In this edited collection of letters, June Hopkins and Allison Giffen attempt to redeem the memory of Ethel Gross from the effacement she suffered during her life as wife, and eventually divorcee, of Harry L. Hopkins. Harry Hopkins was a leading social worker during the 1920s, who rose to government office in the 1930s, heading a number of relief agencies developed under the New Deal, including the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration. He was also a close advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and acted as FDR's special emissary during wartime. The editors' choice of title, then, is a riposte to contemporary media descriptions of Ethel during her lifetime that chose not to name her, but to identify her only by her "scandalous otherness" or omit reference to her altogether, thereby erasing her from public life (pp. 1, 25-26, 262-263). The purpose of this book is to acknowledge the life and contributions Gross made to her family and her own work (as well as that of her husband), by writing her back into "herstory" with her own words. Given Hopkins's pivotal role in the 1930s as a policy maker and social welfare reformer, these private letters and the information gleaned therein seek to identify the influences Gross had on Hopkins and his work as well as the way in which Gross engaged with, and was bound by, contemporary social and cultural mores. This book follows the Gross and Hopkins relationship in letters over thirty years of love and divorce during the Progressive era, and interwar and Second World War periods.

Born into an acculturated, middle-class, Hungarian Jewish family in 1886, Etelke Gross, as she was then, immigrated to the United States at the age of five with her mother, Celia Gross, and five siblings shortly after the death of her father, Bencion Gross. Settling in New York's Lower East side in a "typical, dark and air-

less dumbbell tenement," Gross left school in 1898 at the age of twelve and began working as a counselor to young children at Christadora House, a recently established, Christian-inspired settlement house in the East Village. Founded in 1897 by two female philanthropists, Christina MacColl and Sara Libby Carson, Christadora ("Gift of God") House was located in a bustling area of Eastern European Jewish immigrant settlement and the settlement house provided nutritive, health, and education services to the local population. Inspired by principles of Protestant Social Gospel, MacColl and her fellow social workers saw the settlement house as a locus for "Americanization" for the local immigrant communities. Among the crowded tenements and sweatshops, Christadora was a refuge from the surrounding environment to those it served and to those who worked within its walls. Ethel was a counselor, who also worked at the House as personal secretary to MacColl, the settlement's headworker. A mentor to the young Ethel, Christina MacColl had considerable effect on Ethel and would leave a lasting impression on her. While heavily influenced by "MacColl's brand of social Christianity and maternalism," the editors stress that Gross never converted to Christianity (p. 26).[1]

In addition to several positions at Christadora House, Ethel held secretarial and clerical jobs at two institutions which ignited her support for women's suffrage. In 1908 she became private secretary to Katherine Mackay who founded the Equal Franchise Society (EFS) for wealthy women who, like Mackay, supported women's suffrage. In her work for Mackay, Ethel was involved in all aspects of the organization including marching in suffrage parades. While her involvement in EFS was short-lived—she parted from EFS and returned to Christadora House after MacKay's public affair with a married man—Gross was to re-engage her involvement in women's suffrage work in 1913 when she worked for Harriot Stanton Blatch in the Women's Political Union. By the age of twenty-six,

Ethel Gross was already a seasoned activist for immigrants and women's rights and it was at this moment in her life she met Harry Lloyd Hopkins, four years her junior, fresh from college, a midwesterner from Iowa and a Methodist to boot. They rapidly fell in love, conducted a secret courtship over eight months and were married in October 1913 by Dr. John Lovejoy Elliot of the Ethical Culture Society.

The editors, June Hopkins and Allison Giffen, are granddaughter and great-granddaughter respectively of Gross and Hopkins and therefore uniquely positioned to edit these letters drawing on their own familiar knowledge of the two individuals as well as their academic training in history, gender studies, and literature. June Hopkins has also written a biography of Harry Hopkins.[2] *Jewish First Wife, Divorced* begins with a well-researched and strongly analytical introductory essay, giving extensive autobiographical information about the two individuals and detailed analysis of each section of letters (of which there are four), proceeding in chronological order. Each section is itself separately prefaced by brief overviews of the following letters and the work is concluded with a short afterword that sketches Ethel Gross in later life after the end of correspondence in 1945, just before the death of Harry Hopkins in 1946. Specific events, individuals, and institutions are explained in the margins as they occur in the texts and this makes for easy reference and reading.

Beginning with the secret courtship, while Gross was working at Christadora House, the first section of letters provides the bulk of the book's correspondence. These letters furnish the most diverse and dynamic exchanges between the couple, covering their work lives with various agencies and individuals as well as charting their dreams of a life together despite the difficulties of different faiths. I am not certain how the content of the letters and those in the subsequent sections demonstrate, as the dust jacket suggests, "the experience of a Jewish immigrant woman" nor am I convinced that "the process of Americanization, and the construction of citizenship," are similarly exposed in the text of the letters (dust jacket). Indeed the editors themselves use other sources not incorporated in this book to support these claims in their introduction. Moreover, their arguments would have been buttressed more solidly had they contextualized their discussion with works that tackle life on the Lower East Side and the experiences of Jewish immigrant women as developed in works by Hasia Diner and Joyce Antler.[3] By the time Hopkins meets Gross, she has lived in America for over twenty years and has traveled in a number of circles connected with her work, ranging from

wealthy and powerful to grindingly poor and powerless. One does not doubt that Ethel had feelings of "otherness" at the Settlement House or that she strove "to fit in" (as her journal and oral history, cited in the introduction, reveal); however, in her letters she discloses little of these tensions and concerns. This is the private correspondence of sweethearts, caught up in an intoxicating and whirlwind romance, who dwell mainly on their mutual feelings of love and attraction and their future plans. What does emerge strongly through the letters of courtship, as the editors assert, are the concerns the two have for the reception by family and friends of their inter-faith liaison. Harry writes, "But, girl, there is going to be an awful row when your family learns you have fallen from grace.... Oh! But my father! Ye gods—it is lucky that he hasn't a penny for he would certainly leave me out" (p. 34). Afraid that their letters might be read by others at the Settlement House where Hopkins was living, and that such a discovery might lead to "consequences," Ethel suggests Harry burn their correspondence (pp. 35-36). As their commitment to each other grows, each are convinced that their love will sustain them through the difficult times and in the face of opposition from family and societal attitudes towards intermarriage. Another strong theme of these letters is women's rights and the support both share for women's suffrage. Harry Hopkins, however, is not without concerns for how these beliefs might work practically in a future marriage with children given the domestic idyll he envisions. This ambivalence develops over the next series of letters.

Marriage, and more significantly the birth of their first child, bring compromise to the couple's relationship in section 2. Hopkins emerges as the chief decision-maker, while Ethel is shunted into domesticity. This is a key contribution of the book, demonstrating how an active female social worker cuts short her career in order to take care of her family, following social and cultural conventions of her times. As his career in the American Red Cross in New Orleans takes off, Hopkins is consumed by his work, travelling widely. Ethel and their first son, David, depart for a summer stay in Far Rockaway, New York. While Hopkins seems content with the divided living arrangements plunging himself even more forcefully into his work, Gross on the other hand feels sidelined. Pride for Hopkins's work in Lake Charles for the victims of a tornado is tempered by her frustration that she is not similarly involved in such enterprises. As a former social worker, it is increasingly apparent that she would relish involvement and would like to partner her husband in his work. "I received some clippings today about Lake Charles—and I felt prouder than ever of

what you are doing. It must be a great satisfaction of [sic] bring so much comfort. I wish I were with you" (pp. 142-144). So that Hopkins may work freely, and at his behest, Gross's stay in Far Rockaway is repeatedly extended, much to Ethel's chagrin. Intermittent concerns about Hopkins's bachelor lifestyle grow and Hopkins fuels these fears with comments such as "I've had to bite my lip hard several times to keep from going astray" (pp. 173-174)! By the end of the correspondence Gross reasserts her ambition. Once she returns, things will be different. Hopkins will be more involved in family life and Gross will not settle solely for home life. "I am going to make an effort to be of some use—outside—if only for a few hours a week" (p. 179).

For readers seeking material that demonstrates engagement with wider contemporary issues, they may be disappointed. Topics are mainly domestic, with discussion of finances dominating many exchanges and concerns for each other's health and the health of their son controlling others. "Greater" concerns outside of Hopkins's work and household arrangements rarely appear. Despite the ongoing war, few references to world events overseas occur—one telling entry on the subject appears in August 1918, however, when Harry notes, "the war is going great even without me" (p. 170). Hopkins was not able to enlist in the services because of health issues.

Tensions and infidelity in the Hopkins' marriage form the content of section 3 chronicling the years 1919-1928. Whereas other sections feature exchanges of letters, here, except for one letter, almost all of the correspondence issues from Hopkins. This gives a skewed view of the declining relationship. Hopkins emerges as a self-confident, sometimes arrogant, and, at times, even vain man. By 1929 Hopkins and Gross separated, and after seventeen years of marriage, finally divorced in 1931. Gross had primary charge of bringing up their three children (David, Robert, and Stephen). Many of the letters in this final section reflect concerns over money by both parties: Ethel is anxious that Hopkins abide by their alimony agreement and Hopkins struggles to meet these requirements. By this time, Hopkins's government career had taken off and in 1932 he has relocated to Washington, D.C., to work as an administrator for several welfare and relief agencies for Roosevelt's government. Yet little of his high profile work is reflected in their letters, except as the correspondence draws to a close and in the

letters that deal with the death of their youngest son, who was killed in action in 1944. In the fourth section of the book in particular, I am left wondering what lasting significance these letters shed on either of the couple's lives. Much of the correspondence relays their alimony wrangles that might have been usefully reduced to a few sample letters. The substantive detail of Gross's work for the Children's Theater Arts Workshop and the American Youth Hostel Association, and her later refugee and civilian relief work for the American Red Cross are missing, leaving the reader wishing for more information.

There is still more to be learned about Ethel Gross, particularly her earlier life as a young woman before she met Hopkins and her life after the separation from Hopkins. While this book is developed solely as a collection of letters between Gross and Hopkins and should be judged on those merits alone, the expansive introduction promises much more information and insight about Gross than is delivered by the primary sources presented here. I hope that a subsequent work that utilizes a more diverse array of material might flesh out these tantalizing glimpses we have of a woman whose life spanned ninety years of critical periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At \$75.00, this book is expensive for most readers; however, librarians at colleges and universities with Women Studies departments might consider purchasing it.

Notes

[1]. I am drawing heavily on the autobiographical information on Ethel Gross provided in the editors' introduction. Harry P. Kraus, *The Settlement House Movement in New York City, 1886-1914* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Judith Trolander, *Professionalism and Social Change: From the Settlement House Movement to Neighborhood Centers, 1886 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

[2]. June Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999).

[3]. Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 29-31; and Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Schocken, 1997), pp. 17-39. See also Hasia Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women In America from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

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