

# ON THE BOOKSHELF

## “Immigrant Girl, Radical Woman: A Memoir from the Early Twentieth Century”

By Matilda Rabinowitz, with commentary and original drawings by Robbin Legere Henderson  
(Cornell University Press)

I knew practically nothing about the struggles of labor over a century ago, so this book was quite a revelation! The author of this book was the grandmother of the editor. “Her life represents the lives of many immigrant girls who dreamed that America would provide a better life than the one they had escaped—those who found toil, exploitation, and disappointment, yet struggled to realize the ideals of democracy, freedom, and equality that drew them here.” Matilda faced much danger, confusion, great toil, great fear, and yet she made brave choices.

Her father left the family for America, working five years to bring the rest of them to meet him. She and her family (who were Jewish) endured poverty and government pogroms; they crossed the ocean from The Pale (Ukraine), her native land, on a ship that was unseaworthy and was decommissioned a year later. She loved reading and education but had only an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. She turned 14 in the new century just after arriving in America.

In Stamford, the two young brothers worked very hard selling newspapers, and Matilda went to night school. She learned the millinery trade but there were no jobs in her town, so she moved to New York for the season. Afterward she worked as clerk and became a skilled machine hand at a shirtwaist factory. Slowly Matilda became involved in the labor movement. In 1906, the family moved to Bridgeport, a town she describes as “ugly and it got uglier due to rapid growth”, where her father worked as a mechanic in the Locomotive factory, and Matilda worked at another Corset Company. (Later in life she refused to wear foundation garments!)

In 1909 she became a Socialist and became a labor organizer for industrial unionism. The movement grew rapidly until America’s entry into WWI. She also became an interpreter for immigrant workers, as she could speak Russian, English, Polish, Ukrainian and Slovak. Her accounts of field studies, labor riots and mill-strikes give an insider’s viewpoint of a vigorous time in American history. It required her to travel a lot, stay in austere boarding houses, and face arrests and harassment. She moved out from her family permanently when she was 27 and went to Greenville, SC. There she faced her most difficult job if organizing labor. After birthing her daughter with her long-time lover, her career as an agitator changed. She moved to New Hampshire, then to Washington DC, where she became a private secretary. She went to NYC as a labor organizer but saw the dangers of Communist infiltration and takeover of Socialist groups, so Matilda moved to Los Angeles in 1925 to raise her daughter.

I talked to her granddaughter Robin L. Henderson for Women’s History Month ON THE BOOKSHELF on WTBF-AM/FM.