ERNESTINE ROSE BOOK PROPOSAL

Why Ernestine Rose?

Well-known in the nineteenth century, when the Hebrew Leader called her "the best female lecturer in the United States," Ernestine L. Rose (1810-1892) has been undeservedly forgotten. My biography, Ernestine Rose: Jewish Freethinker and International Feminist, restores her fascinating life to history.

Rose saw herself and was seen by her contemporaries as a woman "ahead of her time." Convinced that the future was on her side, she struggled to free herself from the traditions that bound her. She worked for religious and political emancipation, for the equality of women and of the races, for an international identity liberated from nationalist constraints and an economy which overcame the inequities of early capitalism. My book focuses on these struggles. For instance, although Rose renounced religion at an early age and never practised Judaism as an adult, she had to deal with "Judenschmerz" –- the discrimination and prejudice an anti-semitic culture visited upon even non-believing Jews. She did not live to see women achieve the vote, nor economic reforms as basic as the income tax. Yet her attempts to create a new, emancipated existence for herself and others pioneered paths that many followed later. She opened up new ways of life that provide a model even today.

The only child of a Polish rabbi, she lost her belief in Judaism early on. After her mother's death, her father betrothed her at sixteen to a man his own age. She travelled alone by sleigh to a local court, sued for the return of her dowry, and won

her case. She then left Poland forever, emigrating to Berlin, Paris and London, where she became an early socialist.

In 1836, she and her new husband relocated to New York City. Rose rapidly joined three dissident movements: free thought, anti-slavery, and women's rights. In the first, she became an "Infidel" – a member of barely tolerated minority of non-believers at a time of Christian fundamentalist revivalism. As an abolitionist, she encountered disapproval of women speaking in public and danger when she and Susan B. Anthony lectured in South Carolina. As a feminist, she first petitioned for the right of married women to own property, soon meeting Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other New York State activists. By the 1850s, she helped organize and spoke at the yearly Women's Rights Conventions which followed Seneca Falls.

At the forefront of the American women's movement, she travelled to Western Europe in 1856 and befriended British, French, and German activists, forging the international connections that linked early feminists. She maintained her free thought associations as well, publishing her only book, A Defence of Atheism, in 1861. Well-known in radical circles, she embodied the internationalism of her day. She and her husband returned to Great Britain in 1869, where she continued to work actively for feminism and free thought and to connect Americans with their British and European counterparts.

At her death, a British eulogist tried to describe her international identity by calling her "Polish by birth, Jewish by race, German by education, American by adoption, English by affection." Hating to be pigeonholed, she would have preferred an American tribute: "The liberal laws we live under are due to the tireless exertions of this gifted woman, and never ought the women of New York forget the debt of

gratitude they owe to Ernestine L. Rose." This important figure deserves to be restored to our collective memory. Her life enriches women's history, American history, and Jewish history.

Why Bonnie S. Anderson?

I am a well-published author whose writings appeal to a popular audience. My first book, the two-volume A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present has sold over 100,000 copies worldwide. Written with Judith P. Zinsser, it was first published in 1988 by HarperCollins and is now in a revised 2000 edition from Oxford. Penguin (Great Britain), Laterza (Italy), Crítica (Spain and Latin America), and Fischer (Germany) also published it and it remains in print in all editions. My second book, Joyous Greetings: The First International Women's Movement 1830-1860 (Oxford US, 2000; Oxford UK, 2001) received a starred review in Publisher's Weekly, a rave in The New York Review of Books, and special praise from the president of the American Historical Association for putting U.S. history in its international context.

These writings, as well as my articles and speeches, have made me known not only nationally, but internationally. In 2008, for instance, I keynoted a feminist conference in Lyon, France and had a piece on comparative women's history published in Portugal. I also discussed European Women's History at an American Historical Association Roundtable, addressed Columbia graduate students in History on how to lecture, conducted a seminar for Boston high school teachers on early international feminism, and keynoted the Great Lakes History Conference in Grand

Rapids, Michigan. Other material is in my c.v. and my website, www.bonnieanderson.com.

I write well, deliver manuscripts promptly, and can give references from publishers, authors, and academics. Having retired early in 2005, I can devote all my energy to writing. I am already working fulltime on this project.

Why Now?

While writing Joyous Greetings, I read most of the materials on Rose and became enthralled by her. Last year the Feminist Press published Mistress of Herself: Speeches and Letters of Ernestine L. Rose, Early Women's Rights Leader, which I blurbed. This anthology makes work on Rose much easier: the editor scoured contemporary newspapers, convention proceedings, and letters for mentions of Rose without writing a biography of her. My primary research would by in the European phases of her life and can be completed rapidly. I hope to hand in the manuscript in 2012.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1. The Making of a Rebel

"I was a rebel at the age of five," Ernestine Rose liked to boast in her lecture tours of the 1850s. This chapter provides the context for Rose's youthful rebellions, filling in her background as a traditional Jewish daughter in early nineteenth-century Eastern Europe. The only child of a prominent rabbi in the small city of Piotrkow, she was raised in Polish territory in what we now call Orthodox Judaism. (All Jews were "Orthodox" then and Poland did not exist as a nation again until after World War I.) Rose herself is the only source for her family and background, as World War II destroyed the area's records. Yet her accounts are consistent and ring true. They detail a series of rejections of her upbringing, beginning at five when she persuaded her father to transfer her from a school she hated. By twelve, she questioned Judaism's subordination of women, its strict keeping of the sabbath, and traditional fasting. When the girl turned sixteen, her mother died and her father betrothed her to a man his age to "bind me closer to the bosom of the synagogue." After failing to get her fiancé to release her from the engagement, she travelled by sleigh to a nearby court, pleaded her own case for the return of her dowry, and won.

Rose remained immensely proud of this youthful victory, often using it to demonstrate women's ability to act as decisively and independently as men. She left Poland forever in 1827, never returning to her family, native land, or religion.

Chapter 2. Leaving the Shtetl

Between 1827 and 1836, Miss Sigismund Potowski (she used both her parents' surnames) lived alone in various European capitals from age 17 to 26. This chapter details her search for a new home, family, and philosophy. She first moved to Berlin for two years, reading "not dead books but living ones" and supporting herself with a room deodorizer she invented. She perfected her German and probably gave herself the two first names Ernestine Louise which were popular in Berlin then. (Her Hebrew names remain unknown.) Jews were forbidden to live in the Prussian kingdom without royal permission or a bond posted by a citizen. Rose later recounted her interview with Friedrich Wilhelm III. When the king asked her why she didn't become Christian, she replied "Why should I embrace the branch when I have rejected the trunk," one of her first declarations of free thought. He gave her permission to stay.

In 1830, she briefly visited Paris before voyaging on to London, then the largest, most advanced, and progressive city in the Western world. In London, the young woman learned a "charmingly accented" English and became a follower of Robert Owen, an early socialist. Owen had made a fortune as a Scottish factory owner who provided his workers with decent pay, housing, and schooling. By these years, he denounced traditional government, property, and religion in favor of trade unions, communal cooperatives, women's equality, and free thought.

Owenism shaped her beliefs and her life. She called Owen her "father" and met her future husband, silversmith William Ella Rose, in the movement. Marrying in 1836, the young couple sailed to New York with an Owenite group intending to join a socialist commune. Instead, they settled independently in New York City,

opening a store on Grand Street. Rose's American political life began soon after with her advocacy of three radical causes: free thought, women's rights, and anti-slavery.

Chapter 3. An Infidel in New York City

The Roses quickly joined the radical free thought society which celebrated Thomas Paine's birthday every January 29. Not believing in religion was barely legal in these years and most of the society's male members refused to give their names for fear of losing their jobs and homes. Emboldened by her new connections, Ernestine Rose spoke frequently at meetings, convinced the group to change its name to the Infidel Society, and offered toasts at their dinners –- previously a male prerogative. "Free Enquiry –- May it continue to search with the penetrating quality of lightning every dogma and prejudice, and electerise [sic.] with positive knowledge the negative state of the human mind," went one she made in 1840.

This chapter charts how free inquiry shaped Rose's identity. Nineteenth-century reform movements, especially in America, drew on Christian authority for their justification. Abolitionists and women's rights advocates believed that Jesus inspired their actions. Ernestine Rose attempted to ground her feminism and opposition to slavery on her free thought principles. Urging women to stop supporting government, property, and religion to secure their own equality and independence, Rose told her audience at a Reform Convention in 1844 "never to enter a church again....They oppress you. They prevent progression. They are opposed to reason." These remarks aroused "fury and applause," followed by "a shower of hisses." By steadfastly embracing free thought, Rose inevitably isolated

herself even within radical movements. Considered "too ultra" by many feminists and abolitionists, but supported by her husband and other "infidels," Rose forged a lifelong belief in secular humanism which continually inspired her political work and influenced other feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

Chapter 4. Emancipating Women and Slaves

In the late 1830s, American female abolitionists began to argue that anti-slavery and women's rights constituted the same cause. Rose rapidly joined their circles and made the same connection. "The slaves of the South are not the only people that are in bondage," she argued, "All women are excluded from the enjoyment of that liberty which your Declaration of Independence asserts to be the inalienable right for all."

Feminist abolitionists were the most radical women of their day. They dared to speak in public, supported complete racial integration, and worked for political equality for all women and men, including former slaves. This chapter shows how Rose not only joined their ranks, but moved to the forefront, becoming an important national speaker for both women's rights and antislavery. She attended and lectured at the yearly national conventions held by both movements, as well as many state and local meetings. She repeatedly addressed the New York State Legislature in favor of married women's property rights and divorce. She also went on numerous speaking tours during the 1840s, travelling westward to Michigan and south to the Carolinas. William Rose supported her both emotionally and financially in these years, when she birthed two babies who died young. The couple's bond remained important and they sang duets at congenial social and political gatherings.

Chapter 5. Queen of the Platform

By 1850, Ernestine Rose had become a successful public speaker at a time when few women lectured in public. This chapter presents her career as a popular orator. "Her eloquence is irresistible," an English reformer observed, "It shakes, it awes, it thrills, it melts –- it fills you with horror and drowns you in tears. I know not which predominates, intelligence or tenderness, knowledge or love; she excells in both." She could hold an audience for the two to three hours required of orators in these years and even on paper, her eloquence shines through. "What is it to be a slave?" she asked in 1853,

> Not to be your own, bodily, mentally, or morally –- that is to be a slave. Ay, even if the slaveholders treated their slaves with the utmost kindness and charity; if I were told they kept them sitting on a sofa all day, and fed them with the best of the land, it is none the less slavery....Slavery is, not to belong to yourself –- to be robbed of yourself....Emancipation from every kind of bondage is my principle. I go for the recognition of human rights, without distinction of sect, party, sex, or color.

The mistress of lengthy speeches, Rose also excelled at pithy remarks. She took "Agitate, agitate" as her motto. She often argued that "the world does go forward." She demanded that attention be paid to women's role in history. Remember the "Pilgrim Mothers," she urged an 1850 audience, "Did they not endure as many perils, encounter as many hardships, and do as much to form and fashion the institutions of New England as the Pilgrim Fathers?" She dismissed the argument that the husband providing for his wife gave her all she needed: "Yes! He keeps her, and so he does a favorite horse; by law they are both considered to be his property." Introduced at a Thomas Paine celebration in 1855 with the toast "The Ladies –- May they have the courage to express their opinions and the talent to

command attention," she riposted: "The Gentlemen –- May they have the wisdom to appreciate our opinions and the justice to acknowledge them."

She originated an effective strategy against frequent assertions that since women were different from men, they didn't need to vote. If women are different, she argued, then men cannot represent us and so we deserve to vote. And if we are the same as men, then we should vote since men do. In addition to being a leading strategist and orator of the early American women's movement, Rose was also its most talented linguist. She translated a German feminist's remarks to a New York women's rights convention and she read and replied to letters from imprisoned French feminists. She went on a European tour in 1856, meeting her allies overseas. These connections sustained her during the difficult years of the U.S. Civil War and the deep splits it eventually caused within the women's movement.

Chapter 6. Divisions and Anti-Semitism

Rose and other feminist abolitionists tended to be pacifists as well, believing that ending slavery by warfare would do nothing to eradicate the racial prejudice which underlay it. They also valued ending slavery more than preserving the union, which they believed to be corrupt. The Civil War thus presented problems for them. After the war, the 14th Amendment gave the vote to all men, but no women. The U.S. women's movement fractured over whether to be satisfied with gains for black men, or to continue pressing for women's suffrage. During these same years, Rose encountered anti-semitism from within the free thought movement itself. This chapter gives the background to and explores these conflicts and divisions.

Rose had complained of anti-semitism within the women's movement to Susan B. Anthony in the late 1840s; her sorrow over this rebuff brought both women to tears. Most within the women's movement tried carefully to distinguish between Rose's Jewish upbringing and her present disbelief. Introduced at a Women's Rights convention as "a Polish Lady, educated in the Jewish faith," Rose replied,

> It is of very little importance in what geographical position a person is born, but it is important whether his ideas are based on facts that can stand the test of reason....Yes, I am an example of the universality of our claims; not for American women only, but a daughter of poor, crushed Poland, and the downtrodden and persecuted people called the Jews, "a child of Israel," pleads for the equal right of her sex.

Her one published work, A Defence of Atheism, began as an 1861 speech. A few years later, Rose found herself locked in an unpleasant debate about the Jews with the editor of The Boston Investigator, a free-thought newspaper which often published her. He had argued that of all the world's peoples the Jews were "the worst." She replied at length, defending the Jewish people while maintaining her lack of religious belief.

By the end of the 1860s, the Roses decided to return to England. Their motives remain cloudy. Ernestine Rose told friends England would be cheaper than America. A few weeks before the move, she became a U.S. citizen in her own right, insuring that she would both remain an American and become an outsider in Britain. The divisions of the 1860s made America less congenial and probably contributed to her decision to relocate.

Chapter 7. "I Have Lived:" Last Years and Legacy

When she returned to England, Rose renewed her radical British connections. She joined the British Atheist Association and became friendly with its president, Charles Bradlaugh. She remained active in the British women's movement into the 1880s, speaking at numerous meetings in favor of the suffrage and other rights. She travelled to France for an international convention of peace activists. She returned to the United States in 1874 and spoke at the National Women's Suffrage meeting in New York. Praising women's gaining the vote in Wyoming and British municipal elections, she declared "The wonder is not that we have accomplished more, the wonder is that we have accomplished so much." Looking back over the progress she had both witnessed and helped to bring about, Rose found a great deal to celebrate –- not only had many laws changed, but so had public opinion. Positions which seemed impossibly radical in the 1830s, from women speaking publically about issues to wives having the right to divorce and retain custody of their children, had become widely accepted. She looked forward to more progress in the years to come.

Increasing ill-health ended her public career. She remained close to surviving women's rights activists –- Stanton and Anthony each visited her London home in the 1880s. Stanton found her "as bright, witty, and sarcastic as ever" and remarked on Rose's "lively interest…in our movement" and her pride in her achievements. "'I am happy,' she said at parting, "that I have helped to usher in the dawn of a new day for woman.'" Anthony described a sadder scene: "She is vastly more isolated in England because of her non-Christian views than she ever was in America. Sectarianism sways everything here more now than fifty years ago

with us." But free thought also brought her new connections. Her friends from the movement protected her in her last days, when she feared she might be converted against her will. At her funeral, an old free thought ally, George Jacob Holyoake, remembered her own assessment of her life: "It is no longer necessary for me to live. I can do nothing now. But I have lived."

True, but she was not remembered for long. By the 1930s, Rose faded into obscurity, while Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony did not. This last section assesses the reasons American History forgot her.

In large part, this was because Ernestine Rose lived a life ahead of her time. "Mrs. Rose is not appreciated, nor cannot be, by this age," Anthony wrote in her diary, "She is too much in advance of the extreme ultraists even, to be understood by them." As a feminist, an abolitionist, and a pacifist, she pioneered positions which have become standard today. As an internationalist and free thinker, she is in tune with the most progressive tenets of the twenty-first century. Remembering this impressive maverick restores an important figure to history.