

The Conscious Feminist

In June, Gerda Lerner, the pioneer of Women's History, visited Vienna to present her memoir Fireweed

By Ana Tajder

Gerda Lerner is a living proof that it is never too late. Her life is a story of contradictory realities: of being a housewife and a celebrated scholar, a victim of anti-Semitism and a powerful women's rights advocate, at times prosperous and at times poor.

She was born Gerda Kronstein in Vienna in 1920, into an affluent Jewish family. Following the Anschluss, she joined the anti-Nazi resistance, and spent six weeks, including her eighteenth birthday, in an Austrian jail. Her family escaped from Austria and Nazi persecution and in 1939, Kronstein immigrated to the United States.

From there followed a life of risks and rewards along a path of enormous challenges that led her through marriages and children, from Broadway to Hollywood, surviving McCarthyism to launch what became a soaring career in academia as a founder of the discipline of Women's Studies in America and a leading voice for feminism.

Lerner was in Vienna in June for a presentation of the German edition her memoir *Fireweed* (Czernin Verlag) on 10 June at Palais Ausberg and on 16 June in the Jewish Museum. On Jun. 10, a large audience gathered, mainly of middle-aged feminists, to get to know this no-nonsense woman, who in spite of her 89 years, was energetic, and self-assured, the rich life that lies behind her glowing in her bright eyes. With her platinum hair, fuchsia blouse and glistening red lips, this handsome woman seemed more like an aging movie star than feminist, astonishing the audience with her energy.

And this very same energy is the essence of her book. *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Temple University Press), first published in 2002, was titled from the plant which grows on destroyed soil by roadsides and in fire clearings in the forest. While the sheer size of the book (515 pages) is intimidating, Lerner's style and unflinching honesty is addictive. "Reads like a novel," said New York Times. Lerner's unpretentious writing makes reading of her book feel like listening to your grandmother's warm and soft voice weaving irresistible stories from the past. *Fireweed* examines Lerner's personal relationships, especially with her mother and her daughter Gerda, against the background of dramatic historical events, ending in 1958, just as Lerner was beginning her life as a historian.

Lerner was disdainful of memoir writing, she says in the introduction, seeing it as catharsis rather than as an attempt to convey a larger meaning. She thought she had worked out her feelings toward everything she wrote about, she said, but parts of *Fireweed* turned out to be painful both to remember and record.

Unfortunately, the day before her second presentation, her energy gave out, preventing her from personally attending the event. Without her energising presence, the atmosphere at this presentation was a sobering contrast to the first: Dry, quiet and very serious. After a reading by actress Alexia Weiss, former Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer, scheduled to have a conversation with Gerda Lerner, addressed the audience alone, telling of her life and her book. And there is a lot to tell.

Lerner had emigrated to the United States with the help of her socialist fiancé Bobby Jensen, worked whatever work she could find. She and Jensen married and divorced, and she later married Carl Lerner, a theatre director who was active with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). The Lerner's moved to Hollywood, where Carl began working in the film industry and later became a successful filmmaker. They remained active in the CPUSA even during the repressive years of the McCarthy era. It was a happy marriage that produced a son and a daughter and lasted until Carl's death in 1976.

Lerner had never seen a conflict between feminism and family life.

“I stayed home until my youngest child was 16 years old,” she said in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2002. “I was a full-time mother. I have always felt that feminists have to understand more about that experience. Whenever you want to make any change in the community, from getting a stoplight at a school crossing to putting in a park, the people who make the change are your stay-at-home housewives all over the country, all over the world.”

In her 40s, when her children were in college, Lerner decided to give up her own writing career, which had never gotten off the ground and began her higher education. She earned an A.B. from the New School for Social Research in 1963 and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1965 and 1966. In 1963, Lerner taught what is considered to be the first Woman’s History course at the New School for Social Research.

One of the founders of the field of women's history, she has played a key role in the development of Women’s History curricula at Long Island University, at Sarah Lawrence College, at Columbia University and at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is a professor emerita of history at the University of Wisconsin, Madison and a visiting scholar at Duke University. Now 89, Lerner has written 11 books on contemporary history, women’s studies and feminist thought, and helped change the social history of the West in the second half of the 20th century.

Lerner's work includes a two-volume study, *Women and History*, (Oxford University Press, 1986, 1993), was ”praised for its range but criticized for the slimness of some of its evidence,” *The New York Times* wrote.

"I don't think anyone would take on a topic now like she did about the history of patriarchy," said Dr. Linda Gordon, professor of history at New York University. "A lot more research would have to be done, there would be fewer generalizations." But as in writing a book like *Fireweed*, Gordon said, Lerner showed an ambition that combined thorough examination with unflinching honesty.

So do we still need women's studies? Lerner laughed.

“For 4,000 years, men have defined culture by looking at the activities of other men,” she said, putting on her professorial voice. “The minute we started questioning it, the first question was, ‘Well, when are you going to stop separating yourself out and mainstream?’ ”

“Give us another 4,000 years,” she said, “and we'll talk about mainstreaming.”

In English:

Fireweed: A Political Autobiography (Temple University Press)

Living with History/Making Social Change (University of North Carolina)

ISBN 1-56639-889-4

Shakespeare & Company Booksellers

Sterngasse 2, 1., Vienna

Tel: (01) 535-5053

E-Mail: booksellers@shakespeare.co.at

www.shakespeare.co.at

In German:

Feuerkraut: Eine Politische Autobiografie (Czernin Verlag)

SBN-13: 9783707602906

ISBN-10: 3707602907

Café Phil

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