

Ernestine Rose, “the First Jewish Feminist”

“Emancipation from every kind of bondage is my principle.” Ernestine Rose

“You’ve come a long way, baby” from the First Woman’s Rights convention held in Seneca Falls, NY in July 1848 through the passage of the 19th Amendment granting woman the right to vote. But we still have a long way to go for gender and economic equality. And the leaders of the movement read as a pantheon, a who’s who of American history Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Ida Wells, Alice Paul, Lucretia Mott and a Jewish firebrand born in Piotrków, Russian Poland on July 13, 1810 who fought for women’s rights and equality on two continents, Ernestine Rose, nee Ernestine Louise Siismondi Potowsky.

“If, in expressing my opinions, I have been severe alike on Friend or Foe, it is because in principle I know no compromise, I expect no reward, I fear no opposition – but with earliest desire my aim has been steadily directed onward and upward.” Ernestine Rose (letter 1856)

Wherever Rose went to speak she found men dominating the podium to discuss women’s rights. Women who wished to speak were subjected to laughter and derision. Ernestine Rose arose to speak anyway.

“Have you ever shared an unpopular opinion.”

Well Ernestine Rose certainly did. When she arrived in Prussia to find Polish Jews unwelcome, she sought social justice by writing to the king challenging the law requiring sponsorship by a German property holder for Jews. She was exempted. (note: In Berlin, she invented a room deodorizer.)

She went to Holland, then Belgium, then France where she witnessed the overthrow of Charles X. Moving to London, England in 1832 she joined the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, Thomas Paine, the great Democratic theorist and author of Common Sense and the Utopian Socialist Robert Owen to challenge poverty and misery by fighting for better working conditions and housing as well as education and recreational facilities. Owen, her mentor on human rights and equality encouraged her to speak at meetings of the Association of ALL Classes of All Nations, a group cofounded by her and Owen. In 1835, she married William Ella Rose a fellow Owenite and relocated to NY the next year.

In America, Ernestine Rose became a force for women’s issues and religious freedom, public education and abolition. The “Queen of the Platform” lectured frequently in NY, CT and nearby states. She was a featured speaker at the First National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, MA in 1850 and spoke at the Bible Convention in Hartford, CT in June 1853 amongst other venues on topics concerning women’s rights, Abolition and Atheism. She travelled to the South to confront slave holders and to Michigan where she is credited with opening “agitation on the question of women’s suffrage.” Rose was elected President of the National Women’s Rights convention in October 1870, despite objections that she was a Jew and an Atheist.

She worked tirelessly with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Paulina Wright, Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass for abolition of slavery and expanding the rights of women. After the Civil War she supported the anti-Slavery Amendments but challenged the Fifteenth Amendment which gave only Freedmen the right to vote, but not women. She told Susan B. Anthony to “Agitate”, “Agitate” and hence a slogan for women’s rights was born.

Rose was not a committed Jew due to the male dominated Orthodox culture then extant. Her Father was an Orthodox Rabbi who refused her a Jewish education and arranged a marriage for her. She fought this arrangement and ultimately the Polish Jewish Bet Din upheld her position. However, by no means did she fail to challenge bigotry and anti-Semitism. In 1863, she challenged the abolitionist editor of the Boston Investigator, Horace Seaver whom she accused of anti-Semitism.

In 1869, Rose successfully lobbied the NY State legislature to allow married women to retain their own property and have equal guardianship rights for children.

After this success, in 1869, she became a US citizen, but probably due to ill health, she and her husband relocated back to England. She continued to work for Social Justice in England until her death on August 4, 1892 in Brighton.

Susan B. Anthony considered her with May Wollstonecraft and Francis Wright to have pursued and led the cause for women’s suffrage. Twenty-eight years after her death, women were finally granted the Right to Vote here in the US!