

THREE
OUTSTANDING
WOMEN

Dora Askowith

*"Good women are God's sentinels, in the darkest
of earth's night.
They hold with stout hearts, silently, life's outpost
toward the light;
And at God Almighty's roll-call, 'mong the hosts
that answer 'Here!'
The Voices of good women sound strong, sweet and
clear.
Good women save the nation, though they bear no
sword or gun,
Their panoply is righteousness, their will with
God's is one;
Each in her single person revealing God on earth,
Knowing that so, and only so, is any life of worth.
Don't talk of woman's weakness! I tell you at this
hour
The weight of this world's future depends upon
their power;
And down the track of ages, as Time's flood-tides
are told,
The level of their height is marked by the place
that women hold."*

THREE OUTSTANDING WOMEN

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MARY FELS
REBEKAH KOHUT
ANNIE NATHAN MEYER

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By DORA ASKOWITH

With a foreword by

FANNIE HURST

NEW YORK
BLOCH PUBLISHING COMPANY
"The Jewish Book Concern"

1941

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Dedicated to the memory of
my dear Mother
SARAH GOLDE ASKOWITH
whom the women of these
studies personify

PREFACE

WOMEN throughout the ages have graced the annals of history, in every walk of life, while myriads, unheralded, have in their own quiet way, turned many a tide along civilization's onward sway.

Rarely in our own day, have a trio of women, who have each crossed the threshold of three-score and ten, paralleled in action and through the written word, a service more enduring and ennobling than that of Mary Fels, Rebekah Kohut, and Annie Nathan Meyer, though traversing along varied by-ways of the path of life.

Each has sought, in her own way, to unfold the richness and fulness of life. They have been undismayed by ever-recurring problems or gathering shadows of doubt, for beyond the darkness of night they would ever see the brightness of day.

Fortunate, indeed, have those been who have come within their sphere of influence for one cannot help imbibing something of their determination and all-enduring method of long-sought for goals.



Rebekah Kohut

REBEKAH KOHUT

THE same spiritual strength that casts a veritable halo of light over the path traversed by Mary Fels, is seen to dominate the by-ways of Rebekah Kohut. In the life story of the latter we have reflected the history of Jewry throughout the ages; not as usually recorded in the pages of the traditional chronology of events but through the heart and soul of a Mother in Israel, a woman mingling with myriads of human beings, of a multiplicity of races and faiths, throughout all the vicissitudes of time and place and in the midst of kaleidoscopic manifestations of thought and action.

In reliving her life as it finds expression in her autobiography, *My Portion*, one traverses not only along the "Road of Ages" of Jewry, but becomes conscious, at the same time, of the merging within one individual of the contributions of two civilizations; that of Europe, the home of her early childhood, vivified and absorbed by twenty-three subsequent visits, and of America wherein she lived and labored, to the furtherance of whose ideals and institutions she dedicated herself.

Rarely has it been given to one person to number as many striking personalities, among her acquaintances, individuals of every walk of life, in

every part of the world, as pass through the setting of her biography and in her later published book, *As I Know Them*. Of few can it be said, that so many, from the humblest to the most aristocratic, owe the moulding of their lives and careers, as can be attributed to Rebekah Kohut.

As daughter, wife and mother of Rabbis, she emerges as the Matriarch of American Jewry, a designation reverently applied to her in this country and even abroad. In her loving devotion to her mother and stepmother and in her own experiences as stepmother to eight children, she has come to know what motherhood implies. The triangle of her life has been to seek, to find and to give and in her constant pioneering efforts has been ever mindful of the Kohut creed, service to all in need.

As a child of five years of age, Rebekah Bettelheim traversed the Atlantic for thirty days with her mother and five other children, from Kaschau, Hungary, her birthplace, a country torn, at the time, by political and religious strife, to Richmond, Virginia, by way of Philadelphia, where her father who had preceded the family by six months, met them. Richmond, where her father ministered as Rabbi and later as physician as well, held for Rebekah the most poignant memories of her early youth though the family lived there for only seven years. Within a short time, upon the death of her mother, the sacredness and hallowed responsibility of family unity were indelibly im-

pressed upon her by the father's request that all his children take hands, in a circle, and keep it ever unbroken by each guarding the one younger in years. When her father married again, a native Virginian, and another child was added to the circle, the family devotion was not lessened. The new mother completed the process of Americanization for her immigrant family. Within a few years, the stepmother became an invalid and again the children were made conscious of the dictum impressed upon them of service to each other.

In 1875 the call of a new rabbinical post brought the Bettelheim family to San Francisco and, as Rebekah expressed it, her first reaction to California was that of amazement and delight. The transition from Richmond, a city of floral beauty, romance and war-time hatreds, to San Francisco characterized "by the recklessness of the gold rush, the fiery spirituality of Spanish missions, frenzied dances of the Barbary Coast, where the population was heterogeneous and democratic," opened up a new world to the impressive child and had a tremendous influence in moulding her character and desires and setting problems to the solution of which her later life was to be devoted.

The formative, educational background of her life seems to have been laid in San Francisco where she graduated from the High and Normal schools and attended two years at the University of California, specializing in English literature and history. From early childhood, her home environ-

ment had been that of the scholar. The library housing thousands of books, in a multiplicity of languages, on countless subjects, was not only the sanctum sanctorum of her father but also the meeting place of his family. Here, not only did he work upon a revised English version of the Bible and carry on his correspondence with great scholars of Europe and America, but all the children prepared their school and college work. In this study, people of different interests gathered, many to dominate American life for several decades. Here, too, the Rabbi's daughter became cognizant not only of problems of lesser scope, besetting her own people, in those days, such as the conflict between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, but the beginning of the recognition of a fact that was to give her much food for thought and action in maturer years, namely, that the trials and tribulations of Jewry, as a whole, constitute the saddest legacy of the ages.

It was during her early years, in San Francisco, that the young woman experienced a series of spiritual trials that, eventually, not only strengthened her wavering faith but set problems the solutions of which she was to seek later in life. The sorrow of the Jews which seemed to stand out in striking contrast to the poise and cheerfulness of the Christians, caused her to ponder over the possibility of assimilation, a process that in later years she proved to be inefficacious. Through different media, the mature and experienced woman was to

make clear the fact that the exercise of tolerance towards the Jews led the latter to adopt the customs and develop the spirit of those among whom they lived, whereas intolerance caused a retreat, within themselves, and falling back upon those teachings and observances which constitute their original sources of life. The nearness of Chinatown to her school, and contact with people of other races, brought potently before her the question of racial significance, a problem to which she was to devote much study.

Another mental struggle that beset the growing girl's mind was due to the pangs of poverty that, naturally, overtook the daughter of a Rabbi, with seven children, whose material means were limited. Together with her devoted brother Felix, who, in time, became resident surgeon of the Panama Canal under De Lesseps, and was instrumental in having the first hospital built there, she vowed that if ever she was free from the limitations imposed by poverty, which she later declared to be the source of all evils, that she would devote herself to helping others—a vow that she sacredly kept, not only when affluence came to her, but even when she had but little beyond the requirements of daily existence.

An additional mission in her life that found its origin in her San Francisco days, was to fight the battle for the emancipation of her sex. The conservative congregational members looked askance at the Rabbi's daughter working in the field of

higher education, though she did so with the approval of her father and bearing in mind the fact that her mother had been the first Jewess to teach in Hungary. Imbued through her extensive biographical study of the Jewesses, throughout the ages, with the spirit of those who had helped to save and perpetuate Judaism and finding a striking similarity of their ideals with the women of her day, she set herself the task of working in the front ranks of American Jewish womanhood. She little dreamt, in those days, that she was to become one of the leading champions of woman suffrage, in America, working indefatigably in behalf of women of every faith and in every walk of life. Allied with her quest to improve the status of the mothers of society, was her attempt to help their children. This effort found expression in her kindergarten service. She became an ardent adherent of the kindergarten idea, introduced in the United States by Professor Felix Adler, from Switzerland. She always looked back with pride to her first assignment in the San Francisco kindergarten, conducted by Kate Douglas Wiggin, later to become famous as a novelist.

While engrossed in her multiple tasks in the Californian city, Rebekah was suddenly apprised of the fact that her father had accepted another rabbinical position in Baltimore. A brief vacation before the family moved eastward, brought the young woman to New York. Here she met the friend of her father, the former Chief Rabbi of

Grosswardein, and Jewish representative-elect in the Hungarian parliament, who had been recently called to the pulpit of Central Synagogue of New York. She learnt from her father all about this great scholar, Dr. Alexander Kohut, and his literary venture, the Hebrew compendium, "Aruch Completum," to which he had already devoted twenty years of his life. The published volumes, in the possession of her father, were familiar to her. Little did she dream that, almost at first sight, this renowned scholar, whose wife had recently died, would ask her hand in marriage and that she would become a mother to his eight children.

Again, motivated by an almost innate desire to be of service, this young woman of twenty-two, in February 1887, was married to Dr. Kohut by the father of her lifelong friend, Henrietta Szold, another woman whose whole life has been dedicated to serving the people of Israel.

Within a short time she came to her new home in New York City, at Beekman Place, overlooking Blackwell's Island, a place ever symbolic of human tragedy and remedial law. As mother to eight children, five daughters whose sentimental father had named after a queen and four princesses in Hungary, and three sons, Rebekah Kohut entered the environment of another focal American center, wherein her manifold ideals were to find practical consummation.

In the second year of her marriage, Mrs. Kohut with her husband, undertook an European trip

that was to remain for her a repository of cherished memories. Before the trip she had known Dr. Kohut as husband, father, preacher in the pulpit and scholar in his sacred library. Returned to the atmosphere of his native home, he was to appear in a new light of devoted son to his aged mother, revered friend in a circle of European scholars and spiritual leader in the setting of the old world Jewish communities. Within a short time, because of the failing health of Dr. Kohut, another European trip was undertaken. This was made especially significant by the securing, in Berlin, of a publisher for the sale and distribution of the Rabbi's work, his life task, the "Aruch Completum," in eight volumes containing four thousand double-columned pages with an index and supplementary volume. The completion of this stupendous undertaking, in May of 1889, that was looked upon by the Kohut family as a sort of child that had attained its maturity, was acclaimed by the world of scholars as "a monument of science."

The happiness that Mrs. Kohut shared with her husband in the latter's fulfillment of his life's dream was overshadowed by the death in the same year, 1890, of her brother Felix and her father. The latter passed way on a steamer returning from Europe and was buried, at sea, in the flag of his adopted country. With fortitude, she eased her sorrow by rendering her characteristic service to those in need, and engaged in public activities. She joined the Women's Health Protective Association

and participated in the militant campaign to maintain cleanliness in the New York City streets. She organized and became president of the second sisterhood of American-Jewish women. This organization rendered service among the poor of the city and supported a small day-nursery and kindergarten. The members of the Sisterhood cooperated with the United Hebrew Charities, working especially on the lower East Side, where Mrs. Kohut began her years of service to the numberless immigrants who had fled from the persecutions that were rife, at that time, in Russia and Roumania.

The dominant characteristic of Rebekah Kohut's life, service to others, again found marked expression, upon the death of her husband, four years after she had lost two members of her family. These years had intensified the trinity of affection between the invalid father, the learned son, George Kohut, in whom was the apotheosis of the parent, and the devoted stepmother. The sick room hours of watchfulness had led to Mrs. Kohut's preparation of lectures, in English literature, that she thought might sometime be utilized. She also read countless volumes dealing with Jewish history. The reading of the latter deepened her conviction that she must strive to give expression to the noble traditions of her people, particularly the exaltation of the Jewish womanhood of the world.

Cognizant of the fact that the material well-

being of her children was dependent upon her, she undertook the multiple tasks confronting her, in the spirit of one who has a noble mission to perform. With marked skill, she managed her household, delivered lectures in Mrs. Jacob Schiff's drawing-room, as a small source of income, served as President of the Council of Jewish Women, volunteered as a teacher in the Sabbath School, and delivered numerous public addresses for which she received no emoluments.

Called to Europe by the illness of her son George, who had gone to study there, Mrs. Kohut chanced to meet Dr. Theodor Herzl, the already heralded prophet of Israel. Because of her intense love for the country of her adoption she did not at that time react, sympathetically, to the idea of a national Jewish homeland. Later, however, when she had occasion to spend several week-ends at the same health resort, near Vienna, she emerged as a full-fledged Zionist converted by Herzl himself. A few years later, while in Europe again, it fell to her lot to stand at the bier of Herzl, as an American newspaper correspondent and to dispatch to her compatriots an account of the founder of the Zionist conception. For the attainment of this idea she has herself, since worked indefatigably.

The economic problems with which Rebekah Kohut had constantly to cope led to her initiation of schools that have been connected with the Kohut name for decades and that have played an important role in the educational system of our

country. Her training and experience had prepared her for the opening of the first "Kohut School for Girls," established in West 58th Street, in New York City, with an enrollment of one hundred students, including both boarding and day pupils. The school offered an outlet for the keen teaching ability of her son George, who had returned from his European years of study. At the same time, his mother was offered ample opportunity to give expression to her aptitude for teaching, administrative control and spiritual training of young women during the five years of the existence of the school.

Despite the fact that up to this time, four of her eight children had been married, concern over the spiritual and economic welfare of those who were still with her caused Mrs. Kohut to make still another sacrifice, as was ever her wont. She gave up what had been to her the fulfillment of one of her cherished dreams, the Kohut School for Girls, that she had founded. She did not, however, give up the opportunity that the added leisure time gave her of continuing her own studies, at Columbia University, and the School of Philanthropy. At the same time she carried on her social and spiritual work as trustee of the Emanuel-El Sisterhood and the various organizations with which she was affiliated.

Together with her son George, who had imbibed from his father a deep scholastic craving, she continued the Kohut tradition of fostering educa-

tional enterprises. Owing to impaired health, Dr. George Kohut found it necessary to give up his work as Rabbi of the congregation at Dallas, Texas, and his librarianship at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. He was able, however, to direct his efforts to the establishment of a private school and Summer camp, for boys, at Riverdale-on-the-Hudson, that were opened in 1907.

Sharing her son's almost passionate desire to develop Jewish scholarship, together they carried out, annually, the wish expressed in the codicil of the will of Alexander Kohut, that upon the anniversary of his death, a poor student receive financial aid to enable him to pursue his studies. They created the Alexander Kohut Foundation, at Yale University, at the Vienna Seminary, in Berlin, and at the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. In 1912, Yale University received the Alexander Kohut Memorial Collection of several thousand volumes of Oriental and Semitic literature and, in 1915, the Alexander Kohut Memorial Publication Fund was instituted as the combined gift of the family and the University. Upon the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Alexander Kohut, there was established, at Yale, in his name, the first Semitic fellowship at an American college that was awarded, as the first holder, to a Christian woman.

In 1920, Dr. George Kohut became the executive director and bought control of the Columbia Grammar School first founded in 1763. Upon his

death, on the last day of the year 1933, his mother assumed the added task of carrying on the work of her scholarly son who had served as a Maecenas to countless scholars whose writings might never have been published without his aid. His efforts in furthering education and his own attainments as a student of Semitic lore, find adequate expression in the book written by his mother and dedicated to the fountain head of the Kohut acquisition of Jewish learning, *His Father's House*, published by the Yale University Press in 1938. The name of her son has been further immortalized by the founding, in the Palestinian Colony named after Justice Louis D. Brandeis, "Ein Hashofet," that has within its precincts also the Rebekah Kohut Forest, of a George Alexander Kohut Memorial Library.

Even before the death of her son, Mrs. Kohut was, for many years, carrying on what seemed to many an almost superhuman load of responsibilities. To care for others seemed to be an innate characteristic of this woman. Her work at the "Educational Alliance," among the multiplicity of individuals on the lower East Side, the designated Ghetto of her day, was a source of inspiration and deep satisfaction to her and became part and parcel of her life. After class hours at the "Educational Alliance," she visited with her students, from every walk of life, the cafes on Grand or Canal Street, sensed their material problems, instilled into them a spiritual love for the culture of their

own people and a deep reverence for the institutions of their adopted country. With her sister, Cyd, she entered, whole-heartedly, into the settlement work on the East Side, exercising a most benign influence upon young girls, many of whom later became prominent leaders in their chosen fields of endeavor.

Mrs. Kohut became a member of the Board of Trustees of the Y. W. H. A. and at the outbreak of the World War in 1914, served as industrial chairman for the National League for Women's Service, finding work for countless individuals during one of America's most serious unemployment periods. She helped raise funds for the American Jewish Relief and Joint Distribution Committee, addressed mass-meetings and organized units at which her slogan was "U. S. stands for United Spiritually." In November 1917, she started the movement to raise money and equip a unit of Jewish women to send to Europe. In April, 1920, as Chairman of the Reconstruction Committee, she went abroad, visited many European cities, working among the thousands of refugees, started the plan of Americanization for the multitude who were encouraged to seek a haven in the United States. Several times she returned to Europe after organizing additional units sent abroad by the Council of Jewish Women, to give succor to the desperate refugees. Her reconstruction efforts were crowned by the calling of a World Congress of Jewish Women, of which she was elected Presi-

dent, May 1923, with the resultant creation of a permanent international organization, with affiliations of more than a million Jewish women, for the purpose of ameliorating the suffering brought about by the first World War.

The second European conflict finds Rebekah Kohut confined to her home, recuperating from a long period of illness. Despite physical and mental pain over the cataclysm of sufferings, she still sends forth from her sickbed messages of hope, courage and prayers that the merciful God will bring light to a world cast into the darkness of strife.

When one reflects upon the life of Rebekah Kohut, steeped in the wisdom and greatness of soul that often is begotten through sorrow, singularly rich in experience and possessed of, virtually, all the ennobling characteristics of a human being, there seems to come forth rays of spiritual sustenance. To those groping in the darkness, there looms up, in the distant horizon, a vision of a future state of peace, good-will and mutual understanding where such Mothers in Israel will prevail over the children of men.