
Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains

by Rachel Calof
J. Sanford Rikoon, ed.

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About This Book

Rachel Calof's Story, written in Yiddish by the title character as a private memoir for her family, found its way into print after being deposited in the American Jewish Archives. In simple, yet vivid and unforgettable prose, the memoir conveys the extreme hardships— emotional as well as physical— that confronted this Jewish woman pioneer homesteader in the American heartland.

Discussion Questions

1. Rachel is shocked by her first sight of a "pioneer woman" on the Plains whom she compares unfavorably to any "self-respecting" Jewish woman in Russia. Why does she see homesteading as a "terrible way to live," close "to the living level of an animal"? Do her feelings change?
2. The prairie becomes a main "character" in the story, influencing Rachel Calof's life as significantly as any person. What ordinary and special crises does the family experience as a result of the rough weather and living conditions of the Plains? What impact did the prairie have on Rachel's development as a person?
3. Rachel provides glimpses into significant moments of women's lives on the plains. What did her "knockout" Jewish wedding with its "magnificent banquet" and "festivities" consist of? How does she manage pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation amidst the hardship of prairie living? What role did what she calls her mother-in-law's "religious fanaticism, beliefs, and superstition" play in the "world of madness" she inhabits after her first child's birth?
4. Rachel describes a scene in which the shochet brought in to slaughter an ox on the occasion of her son's brit orders her to eat traif meat. How did the circumstances of the birth and the mother's health affect his decision? How do you regard his decision and the family's response to it?
5. How successful was the arranged marriage between Rachel and Abraham? What role did Abraham play in her life and on the farm? What attitudes does Rachel express as she describes their

farm's eventual success and Abraham's letters of commendation from "two presidents of the United States"? Although Rachel doesn't discuss her own role, Jewish women often helped their husbands run family businesses—whether farms, stores, hotels, or factories. What role do you imagine Rachel played in the success of the family's enterprise? Are there women in your family who made important contributions to family business enterprises?

6. Rachel Calof clearly makes herself the heroine of her memoir. How might the descriptions change if the story had been told from the perspective of Abraham? Of Rachel's mother-in-law?

7. Do you consider Rachel Calof an introspective writer? What insights does she offer about her own character and behavior?

8. How significant was Judaism in this story? Does it emerge only as a negative factor or were there positive qualities to Rachel's religious background and life? What rituals and observances does she mention in the book? Why do you think her house became the "center for all the Jewish holiday celebrations" for the Jewish farmers "from far and near"? What kind of celebrations do you imagine took place?

9. For Jewish immigrants, passing on traditional Jewish values to children was an obligation fraught with tension. Rachel tells us very little about this. How do you think Rachel and Abraham might have handled this issue?

Critical Essay

by Penina Migdal Glazer, JWA Board Member and Professor of History at Hampshire College

Rachel Calof never intended for her memoir to be published and shared with an audience unknown to her. When she was about 60 years old, living in St. Paul, Minnesota, she wrote the story of her life in Yiddish so that her children and grandchildren would understand the experience of her immigration to America. Upon finishing the manuscript, she tucked it away in a drawer where it remained for many years. When her daughter came across the long-forgotten manuscript, she recognized that it might be a family treasure. Rachel's son and a friend translated the memoir and deposited it in the American Jewish Archives. Just a few years ago J. Sanford Rikoon discovered the text, edited it and brought it to Indiana University Press for publication in 1995, about sixty years after Rachel Calof first put her memories on paper. We are all the more fortunate for this serendipitous find in the Archives, for the memoir provides wonderful insight into an unknown facet of Jewish immigration.

Rachel Calof's Childhood

Calof's narrative begins with a stark account of her grim and oppressive childhood in Russia. After the death of her mother, she and her siblings were first subjected to mistreatment from an uncaring housekeeper and then from a stepmother; then her father deserted them. Her relatives were happy, when the opportunity arose, to send the dowryless eighteen-year-old to America as a mail-order bride for a young man, Abraham Calof, who had emigrated earlier. Rachel describes her meeting with her prospective husband in New York and their subsequent journey to join his family on their new homesteads in North Dakota.

A Prairie Life

It is the story of life on the prairie that makes Rachel's story so powerful and compelling. All of her experiences were governed by these extraordinary surroundings. She recounts her dismay when she first meets her future in-laws and sees the brutal and primitive condition in which they were living.

The remainder of Rachel Calof's story centered on the struggles of her family to tame the prairie and build a civilized life. Her account highlights her growing regard for her husband and her own strength in adapting to the difficult conditions in which she found herself. The early days were very difficult - no privacy, extreme hardship, minimum fuel and food to get through the winters. There were many pregnancies and quarrels with her mother-in-law, whose superstitions and costly errors she recounts in great detail. But slowly, Rachel and Abraham did conquer the wilderness. Abraham worked hard to create schools on the prairie and was eventually cited by two United States presidents for his contributions. On holidays the Calof's home became a center for Jewish families from all over the state. They raised seven children and were convinced that their optimism, hard work, and intelligence had resulted in a better life in America. Rachel never looked back nostalgically to her life in Russia. Her independence, her social mobility, and her modern ideas were nurtured in America as were her family and her Americanized, but still traditional, Jewishness.

Rachel Calof came directly from the Russian Pale to the wilderness of North Dakota. Unlike those who came to New York or Philadelphia or Baltimore, Jews in the rural Midwest found few accessible Jewish institutions and no nearby community to assist in their acculturation process. Yet, Rachel brought some of the values of modernity with her and was determined to impose them on her new surroundings. Her desire for privacy represented one very modern value. It was also the source of her greatest tensions with Abraham's family. She could not tolerate all the in-laws crowding in on her in one tiny room in a primitive shack. Similarly, she was ready to rebel against the strict piety and superstitions of her mother-in-law. Rachel's attitude toward the wilderness reflected the ideas that prevailed at the turn of the last century. Nature was to be conquered and "civilization" put in its place. Nowhere in the memoir did she write about the beauty or the majesty of the prairie. In her mind, the surroundings were largely a threat and a hardship and only her perseverance and intelligence allowed her to discover and use some of its assets.

Only a tiny fraction of Jewish immigrants turned to homesteading to form their new lives. In that sense, Rachel Calof's story is clearly a novelty and very distinct from most immigrant memoirs. But in her search for a better life, in her devotion to family and her willingness to work very hard, we recognize a more familiar pattern. This is not a book filled with self-doubt or ambivalence. It conveys her pride in her success and her desire for her descendants to know of the hardships that she and Abraham had to endure to build a life. It is a compelling story that enchants its readers.

Jewish Immigrants as Homesteaders

The volume published by Indiana University press also contains two historical essays which attempt to put Rachel Calof's memoir in historical perspective. In his essay, "Jewish Farm Settlements in America's Heartland," Sanford Rikoon elaborates on several efforts to support farming by Jewish immigrants. Few Jews had been allowed to own land in Eastern Europe, so the romantic notion of farming one's own land represented the fullest form of social and economic liberty to some visionaries. Between 1880 and 1940, approximately 8000 Jews took part in farming and homesteading in the Heartland, or rural Midwest. In Ramsey County, North Dakota, where the Calofs settled, over ninety homestead claims were filed by members of Jewish farm families. Many families, like Rachel and Abraham, were able to file more than one claim. As for actual residents, the record shows that in the period between 1898 and 1907, the number of Jewish families decreased from thirty to twenty.

The effort to homestead was fraught with obstacles. The immigrants brought virtually no agricultural experience and precious little capital. Many settlers lasted a very short time before moving on. But others, like the Calofs, withstood the initial privations and managed to build a fairly successful

enterprise.

Despite their very hard work, their success probably would not have been possible without some philanthropic support. Two societies, the Chicago-based Jewish Agriculturists' Aid Society of America and the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society of New York gave crucial loans, many of which were never repaid. Sanford Rikoon points out that records of these societies reveal several loans to Abraham Calof. Rachel alludes very obscurely to Abraham borrowing some money to see them through an emergency, but she does not reveal the extent to which all families relied on some philanthropic provision of capital.

Jewish farming in the Heartland did not last more than a single generation. According to Rikoon, a 1965 survey in North Dakota showed only three families (of more than 46,000) who had any Jewish ancestry. The Jewish farming presence was gone by the middle of the twentieth century. Some left because of the difficulty in making a living. But even those who succeeded, as Rachel and Abraham did, ultimately chose a less isolated life. Many Norwegians and Russians who also settled this area stayed on. Jewish departures appear to have been motivated by the desire for Jewish education and Jewish marriage opportunities for their children. The settlers feared a loss of their cultural heritage if they stayed too long. Although they were not necessarily religious and had adapted to a life with minimal Jewish leadership and institutions, they feared a loss of their "Yiddishkeit" if they remained on the land.

Rachel Calof's story as Women's History

In the final essay, "Rachel Bela Calof's Life as Collective History," Elizabeth Jameson analyzes the way in which the memoir reflects the new women's history of the West. Documents like the one Rachel Calof provided us help to puncture the myth of the West as dominated by cowboys, ranchers and other frontiersman with women present only as barmaids or as shadowy figures. The memoir can certainly be read as a feminist document. Rachel never presents herself as simply the supportive little lady that might be seen as the Jewish version of Little House on the Prairie. Rachel Calof arrived in North Dakota where 44% of the population was female and almost half of the population was foreign born. She is part of the rich diversity that gave life to the area.

Many traditional role divisions remained in place. Although Rachel and other women filed independent land claims, they did not have the power of the men to determine work or resource allocation or to decide what the living arrangements would be. Rachel played many traditional roles as mother and wife, but we have a sense of her discomfort when she was excluded and her determination to push the boundaries. Her story is one in which she and Abraham shared in the collective struggle to build a better life. Psychologically, she presents herself as an equal, resentful of any subordination that her mother-in-law (as a representative of the traditional order) attempted to impose. By placing herself centrally in the narrative history of her time and place, her story gives us a fuller sense of women in the Heartland.

Additional Resources

On the Web:

[The Northern Great Plains, 1880-1920](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ndfahtml/ngphome.html) - Library of Congress exhibit
(<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ndfahtml/ngphome.html>)

[Unpacking the Prairie: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ndfahtml/ngphome.html)
(<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ndfahtml/ngphome.html>)